COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

JANUARY 21, 2026

The gardeners' gardens

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A stunning property built in 2013 to exacting standards offering privacy and seclusion in about 20 acres with far reaching southwesterly views.

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Manège & direct access to bridleways | Swimming pool | Ground source heating | EPC B | Approximately 20.7 acres | Freehold | Council Tax band H
Abinger Hammer 2.3miles | Guildford 8.2miles | Gatwick 9.7 miles

Guide price £6,950,000

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01483 617930
morten.boardman@knightframk.com

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julia.meadowcroft@knightfrank.com

House Partnership
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dcarter@housepartnership.co.uk

MICHAEL GRAHAM

Cottered, Hertfordshire

Guide Price: £1,600,000

5 Bedrooms | **3** Reception Rooms | **4** Bathrooms | **B** EPC

A modern five bedroom detached house with driveway parking, an integral garage and approximately 1.37 acres of established gardens with countryside views on the edge of Cottered. The architect designed property was completed in May 2024 and was built to be eco friendly and thermally efficient including an air source heat pump powering underfloor heating throughout.

Michael Graham Hitchin
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BELVOIR TERRACE, CAMBRIDGE

This stunning Grade II listed Georgian town house, in a prime location, has been modernised, providing about 4,668 sq ft of accommodation while retaining its Georgian integrity and elegance.

6 bedrooms | 3 bathrooms | 6 reception rooms | Front garden | Part walled rear garden | Ornamental pond | Parking
EPC D | Freehold | Council Tax band G
Cambridge station 1.2 miles (London Kings Cross from 50 minutes)

Guide price £4,000,000

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A BEAUTIFUL ESTATE IN AN ELEVATED SETTING

8 4 4 | 104 acres

Withyham, East Sussex. Guide £5 million

Offered for the first time in 35 years, this exceptional country estate enjoys an elevated position with sweeping views over Ashdown Forest. The generously proportioned un-Listed main house provides four elegant reception rooms, eight bedrooms, and four bathrooms. Additional features include a study and ancillary accommodation comprising an annexe, granary flat and staff quarters. Outside, there is a private pool area, a two-bedroom cottage, extensive stabling, barns, a rebuilt indoor arena and garaging, all within 104 acres of gardens, woodland and paddocks.

Freehold | Council Tax Band = H | EPC = E

Edward Wain-Heapy

Country Department
07929 383494
edward.wainheapy@savills.com

Charles Lang

Tunbridge Wells
01892 507060
charles.lang@savills.com

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Surrey, Nr Farnham

A beautifully restored and extensively extended period country house in a magical setting

Farnham: 2.2 miles, Haslemere: 9.5 miles, Guildford: 14.1 miles, Heathrow Airport: 31 miles,
Southampton: 38.2 miles, London: 44.5 miles, Gatwick Airport: 45.9 miles
Reception hall | Drawing room | Sitting room | Family room | Dining room | Kitchen/breakfast room
Orangery | Indoor swimming pool with gym | Principal bedroom with ensuite bathroom and 2 dressing rooms
5 Further bedrooms (all ensuite) | Separate wing with study, artist's studio, kitchen and office (suitable as separate annexe)
Tennis court | Gardens and grounds | Woodland | Planning consent for outdoor pool
About 18 acres

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Guide Price £11,950,000

&

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020 7591 2213
james.machell@struttandparker.com

Jordan Sturgess
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jordan.sturgess@struttandparker.com

JSA: Knight Frank
Country Department
020 7861 1065
james.crawford@knightfrank.com

Devon, Clyst St Mary

A remarkable Grade I listed country house with outbuildings, set in about 31 acres of parkland in a secluded yet exceptionally well-connected rural position on the edge of Exeter

Clyst St. Mary: 1 mile, M5 (Jct 30): 1.6 miles, Topsham: 3.9 miles, Exeter city centre: 5 miles, Exeter St. David's mainline station: 6.8 miles
Main house: Reception hall | Drawing room | Morning room | Library | Dining room | Kitchen/breakfast room | Laundry | Cellars | Stores | Chapel
Principal bedroom with adjacent bathroom | 7 Further bedrooms (4 ensuite) | **South Lodge:** Two 2-bedroom apartments | One-bedroom apartment | Ground floor studios | Adjoining courtyard | East Lodge | Stable yard | Tithe barn | Stable block | Ancillary outbuildings
Gardens | Parkland | Lake
About 31 acres in all

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Guide Price £3,950,000

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sarah.brown@struttandparker.com

Richard Speedy
Exeter Office
01392 215 631
richard.speedy@struttandparker.com

Cornwall, Restronguet Point

Guide Price £3,400,000

&

A magnificent property with c. 5,000 sq ft of accommodation, direct water frontage, private slipway, dry dock, glorious sub-tropical gardens and sensational panoramic river views

Truro: 5 miles, Falmouth: 10 miles, Cornwall Airport Newquay: 24 miles

Entrance hall | Kitchen/dining room | Sitting room | Inner courtyard/conservatory | Laundry room | Principal bedroom with ensuite bathroom
4 Further bedrooms (2 with dressing rooms and one with ensuite bathroom) | Further bathroom | Shower room | Garage | Boat store
Workshop | Riverside gardens and grounds | Private slipway and dry dock with boat winch | EPC Rating E

About 0.65 acres

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West Sussex, Handcross

Offers in Excess of £4,000,000

&

A stunning and substantial house with refined, elegant accommodation and beautifully landscaped gardens

Horsham: 6 miles, Haywards Heath: 7.5 miles, Gatwick Airport: 12 miles, Brighton: 18 miles

Reception hall | Drawing room | Dining room | Study | Cinema room | Open-plan kitchen/breakfast room/family room | Utility
Indoor swimming pool | Principal bedroom with dressing area and ensuite bathroom | 4 Further bedrooms (2 ensuite) | Family bathroom
2 One-bedroom annexes | Extensive garaging | Stables | Garden stores | Gardens and grounds | Woodland | Fields

About 16.6 acres

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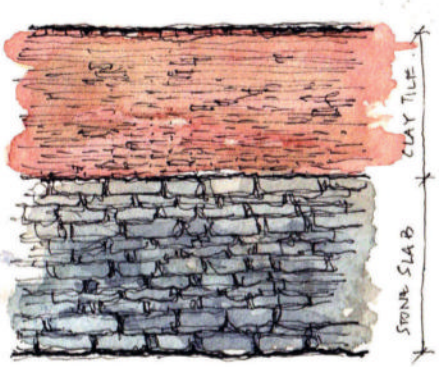

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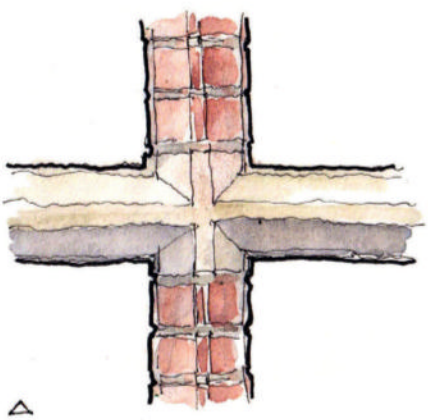

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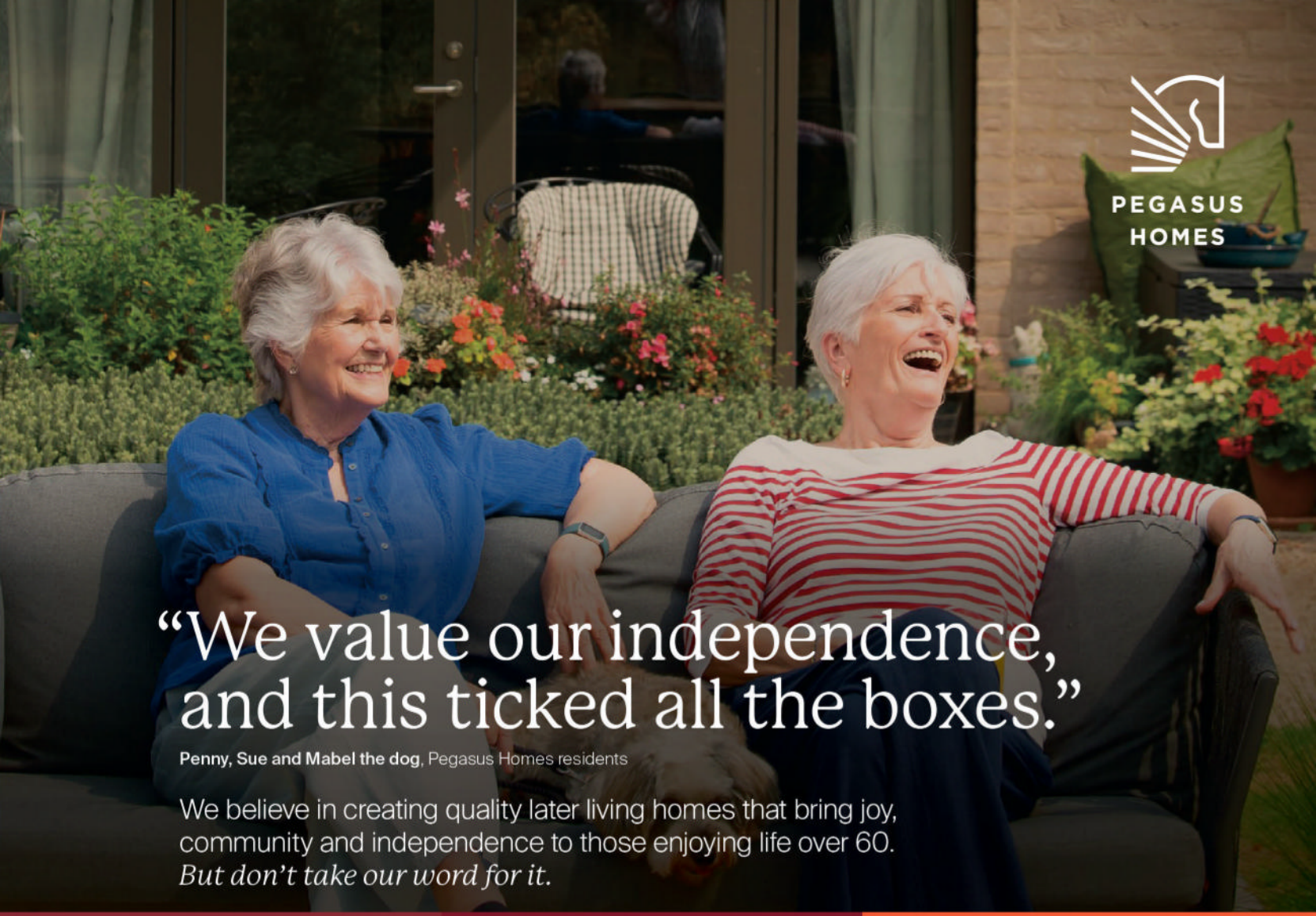

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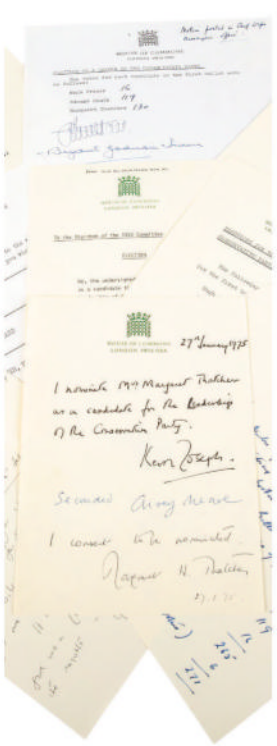

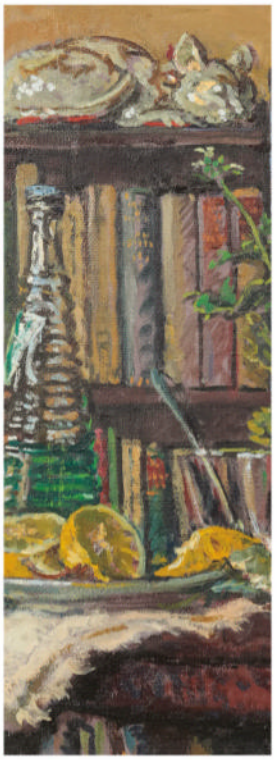

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John Miller
1931 – 2002

A Corner of the Garden at Sancreed oil on canvas 92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins signed

A Corner of the Garden at Sancreed shows John Miller at his most absorbed. There is no view beyond, only immersion: grasses rising, shrubs massing, the sky pressed down into deep blue-green. Light arrives in fragments, caught on petals and foliage, before disappearing again. The rich composition in the corner of his beloved garden stands as a reminder of presence within solitude. Balanced between abstraction and place, the painting reads as both garden and Miller's private interior world.

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Arts & Antiques special issue

The call of the wild: how exotic animals captured the artistic imagination, plus Antony Gormley on sculpture and the literary classics that inspired the Old Masters, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites

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COUNTRY LIFE
VOL CCXXVI NO 4, JANUARY 21, 2026

Miss Poppy Delingpole

Poppy is an account executive at ASA, a luxury communications firm.
She is the daughter of James and Tiffany Delingpole of Fawsley, Northamptonshire.

Photographed with Ernie at home in Northamptonshire by Alex Bradbury

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Russell Sach

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Trees of knowledge

IN the stripped-back, leafless January landscape—the sort that might inspire a snow-flecked Ravilious wood engraving—things normally overlooked come into sharp focus. Nothing enhances a bare skyline more than trees, their branches silhouetted by the rising sun or showing black against a leaden sky; oaks with their improbably heavy limbs; the twiggy ash pocked with rooks' nests and, in the growing dusk, the figures of blasted trunks bent under the weight of their ivy greatcoats.

Capability Brown knew a trick or two when it came to manipulating landscapes. He planted simple groups of trees to draw attention to a view. He also cut down woodland to create clearings and so transformed a rural muddle into pleasing artifice. This he did with such grace, thoughtfulness and foresight that the trees he planted more than 200 years ago still give great pleasure. As taste moved towards the Picturesque, with its preference for a wilder, more rugged Nature, Humphry Repton showed exactly how one could hide an eyesore behind a clump of trees or finesse a view merely by cutting off a wayward branch, often detailing his ideas in the Red Books he created to impress his clients.

Throughout, no tree produced a more graceful effect than the magnificent cedar of Lebanon, introduced in 1639 by Edward Pocock, chaplain to the Turkey Company at Aleppo in Syria. Walk through the landscaped grounds of many a country house today and there will be a venerable specimen, often placed so that its spreading evergreen branches are reflected in the water of a Brownian lake.

Making the right choice about what to plant and where lies at the heart of good gardening, always with a mind to years and decades to come. How antithetical that idea is to this rapidly moving modern world, where split-second decisions can make or lose millions on the markets. No decision matters more in a garden than where to plant a tree and winter is the season for mulling and pondering by a warm fire. Flushed with enthusiasm—and a new project—the temptation is to point a finger at the chosen spot for the new tree, to dig its hole, backfilling with soil, and then to stand back to admire the handiwork. Not so fast, however.

First, you must ask yourself a number of questions: which way does the prevailing wind blow, is there a frost pocket, what is the soil type and who will take responsibility for watering this tree in future, ensuring that it does not dry out at any point over the next several years? Most importantly, have you allowed enough space for the tree to reach its full potential? Get any of these answers wrong and you will be spending a lot more time trying to fix the problem than the fireside planning would have taken.

PPA Front Cover of the Year 2023

Property Magazine of the Year 2022, Property Press Awards

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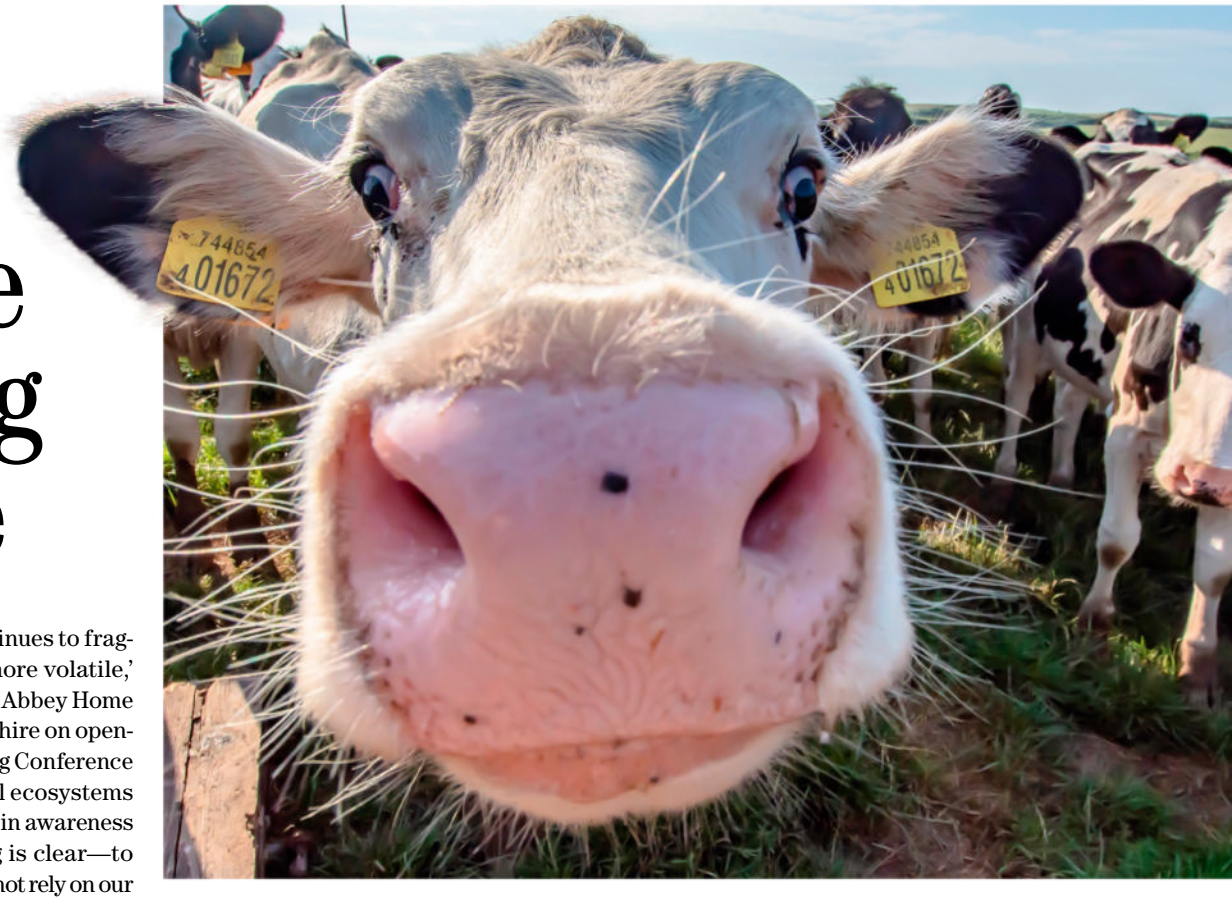
Julie Harding

ORFC aims to drive farming change



I think, therefore I am: our growing understanding of the sentience of animals was one of a host of discussion topics at the wide-ranging Oxford Real Farming Conference

GLOBAL politics continues to fragment and become more volatile,' said Andy Dibben of Abbey Home Farm in Gloucestershire on opening the 17th Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC). 'Destruction of natural ecosystems accelerates despite the increase in awareness of their importance. One thing is clear—to address these challenges we cannot rely on our political leaders. The change will come from the bottom up.' Keen to follow this premise throughout two packed days of speeches and workshops, during which subjects ranged from 'The demise of plant-based foods' to 'Venison: quality meat with a positive impact', it was clear that, as ever, the ORFC would be about farming at the coalface.

'Ban it!' commented Pesticide Action Network's Nick Mole during the unnerving debate on glyphosate, a broad-spectrum herbicide whose use in the UK is soon set to become the subject of a public consultation. Cambridgeshire farmer Martin Lines pointed out that the farming industry has built 'a system around the use of glyphosate', but that instead farmers should 'come back to integrated management plans, where we build in rotations and break crops and [use] agroecological and organic systems'. King's College London's Michael Antoniou, a glyphosate expert, stated that 'the devastating effects of glyphosate-based herbicides on the environment are massive' and that the toxicity of this chemical increases when added to 'highly toxic' co-formulants that facilitate glyphosate's successful infiltration of plants. However, 'regulators throughout the world only consider glyphosate toxicity in isolation'. Although it was once termed 'safe' for human consumption, research has shown that glyphosate causes the likes of oxidative stress, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and several cancers in humans. 'We really need to be moving away from pesticide use altogether,' Prof Antoniou concluded.

> A new study by the Green Alliance has shown that British farmers now profit more by focusing on the environment as opposed to food production

During the 'Time to get drastic on food system plastics?' debate, Joe Yates, co-director of the Agriculture, Nutrition & Health Science-Policy Platform, revealed thought-provoking statistics, including the presence of more than 16,000 chemicals in plastics, with only 6% regulated internationally, more than a quarter deemed by scientists to be hazardous, with information about the other three-quarters left undisclosed by the industry. As of 2015, humanity had created 6,300 million tons of plastic waste, with only 9% having been recycled, 12% incinerated and 79% dumped in the natural environment or landfill. Mr Yates added that the agricultural, fisheries and aquaculture sectors use 12.5 million tons each year. He cited a research project that surveyed 108 UK potato and carrot farms, with each soil sample showing contamination by microplastics—an average of 3,700 particles per kg of soil. The solutions to plastic, concluded Mr Yates, mentioning recycling, are not fit for purpose. 'We should be thinking about system change, not material change… and we need to turn off the tap; we need to stop production of plastics so we can deal with the amount we have in circulation.'

'Animals are present, subjectively, as individuals… They feel, they think, they evaluate, they make choices and decisions,' Françoise Wemelsfelder, professor of animal behaviour and welfare at Scotland's Rural College, said during a discussion on what science and artificial intelligence (AI) reveal about farmed animals as sentient beings. She stated that in recent times there has been an 'explosion' of research and that AI 'is becoming a very powerful tool to help us uncover, for example, how animals communicate together'. Prof Wemelsfelder explained that if humans are to honour animals as sentient beings, 'we must give them the agency they deserve, [letting] them actively exercise their intelligence and manage their own needs'. Natasha Boyland, research officer at the Jeremy Coller Centre for Animal Sentience (LSE), cautioned that, as science advances, safeguards may be needed to ensure AI 'doesn't make things more intensive, efficient and productive without taking into account animal sentience, animal welfare and their needs'.

A fertile meeting of minds

GARDENING enthusiasts love to garner advice from nurseries and growers before they purchase new plants. Gathering together some of the best specialist plant nurseries, placing them in beautiful gardens and welcoming visitors who are seeking guidance and plant purchases is a winning combination, hence the success of the Plant Fairs Roadshow. These fairs cover the South-East and, for the first time this year, London, with new fairs at the Inner Temple Garden, EC4 (May 31), and Chiswick Flower Market, W4 (June 7). The roadshow kicks off at Hole Park in the High Weald, Kent, with a Snowdrop and Spring Plant Fair on February 1. Hever Castle, Kent, will host two events, one on March 22, when Marina Christopher of Phoenix Perennial Plants will be one of many growers in attendance, and an extra event (June 28) will also be held at this childhood home of Anne Boleyn. Tulip enthusiasts will love the display at West Sussex's Arundel Castle (see this week's cover), where the roadshow will be on April 19. For a full list, visit www.plantfairsroadshow.co.uk.

Covering South-West and central England and Wales, Rare Plant Fairs (www.rareplantfair.co.uk) are held in a range of gardens, including H. Avray Tipping's Arts-and-Crafts creation at High Glanau Manor in Monmouthshire (May 31) and at Manor House, Bledlow, Buckinghamshire (June 14).

In Wiltshire, Sarah Rivett-Carnac will organise a Spring Plant Sale on March 20. This is the first of three annual plant sales hosted in her garden at Charlton Farm near Malmesbury (*'A garden from scratch', April 3, 2024*). She also curates an eclectic series of talks at nearby Rodmarton Manor. This year's highlights include Anne Chambers and Vanessa Berridge discussing Three Generations of Women Gardeners at Kiftsgate in Gloucestershire on April 16 (www.thegenerousgardener.co.uk). *TD*

On red alert: Arundel Castle in West Sussex will be a magnet for all lovers of tulips when it hosts the Plant Fairs Roadshow

Himalayan balsam (*left*) is having a damaging impact on river ecosystems, pioneering research by the University of Stirling has discovered. *Impatiens glandulifera* was found not only to outcompete native plants, but its dieback during the autumn/winter causes the riverbank where it has been growing to become more susceptible to erosion during high-flow periods.

'The glittering beauty and scale of this scene fills my heart with both joy and dread. At nearly 9,400ft, it is literally breathtaking, but also a practical challenge for the *plein-air* painter,' says landscape artist Oliver Akers Douglas about *View from the Weissfluhgipfel*, which forms the centrepiece of his exhibition of 40 new works mainly of the Klosters/Davos region of Switzerland. The collection can currently be viewed by appointment in Wiltshire, after which it will be exhibited in Klosters from February 16–March 1 (07884 054177; www.olliead.com)

Good week for

Longleat

The Wiltshire estate is celebrating six decades since it became the first drive-through safari park beyond Africa, which it will mark with a programme of special events, including an Anniversary Garden Party on April 11–12 (www.longleat.co.uk)

A Wiltshire view

A petition has been launched for objectors to the planning application involving the Grade I-listed Leaden Hall that appears in several of John Constable's famous paintings of Salisbury (*Town & Country, November 26, 2025*). Visit www.saveleadenhall.org

Evensong

The Cathedral Music Trust is launching a campaign for the centuries-old tradition of glorious English sacred choral music to have UNESCO Living Heritage status

Boots heritage

An Albert Nelson Bromley-designed Boots the Chemist shop in Liverpool that dates from 1896 has become the subject of a listings bid by SAVE Britain's Heritage

Oysters

Belfast Lough now contains 2,000 adult European oysters and 30,000 juveniles after a restocking programme by Ulster Wildlife. The oysters all but disappeared 100 years ago, with a few survivors discovered in 2020

Bad week for

Shoots in Scotland

The Scottish Government plans to end small-business-rate relief for shoots that don't solely practise wildlife or vermin management, a move the BASC warns will threaten rural jobs and conservation efforts

St Michael's Mount

The violent 111mph winds of Storm Goretti destroyed almost 120 trees on the island off Cornwall

Painted Hall marks three centuries of awe

THE majestic and mesmerising Painted Hall (*above*) in the Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich, London SE10, was completed exactly three centuries ago by Sir James Thornhill, who spent 19 years between 1707 and 1726 enshrining British maritime glory and the Protestant succession in paint. Thornhill covered 40,000sq ft of what is sometimes termed 'Britain's Sistine Chapel' in 200 allegorical, mythological, historical and contemporary figures, all set against a series of magnificent backdrops, and the hall is recognised as one of the outstanding painted survivors of the English Baroque. '"Wow" might be the word the Painted Hall hears the most,' says the Old Royal Naval College's Kate Miners. 'The sheer scale and Baroque splendour are something to behold and this astounds people when they see [it] for the first time or in a new light.'

A landmark £8.5 million restoration was completed in 2019 and, since then, it has welcomed more than 1.2 million visitors. In the past, it was a naval art gallery, a dining hall for Greenwich pensioners and naval officers and was where Admiral Lord Nelson lay in state in 1806. To celebrate the 300th year of its completion, a range of cultural and creative events will be held, including large-scale art installations, talks and tours and wellbeing events (www.ornc.org/explore-whats-here/painted-hall).

A Roman villa has been unearthed by archaeologists in Margam Country Park on the outskirts of Port Talbot in South Wales. Dubbed the town's 'Pompeii' and thought to be one of the largest such structures from the period in Wales, the possibly luxury 4th-century villa may have formed part of an agricultural centre. Swansea University's Dr Alex Langlands, project lead, calls it 'a lifetime find for me, the park and the community'

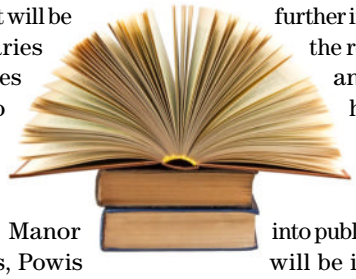
Resting place

A painstaking 14-year research project involving six mortuary chests at Winchester Cathedral in Hampshire is reaching a conclusion, with 1,300 bones belonging to early-medieval bishops and royals being reinterred in them. The chests are thought to contain the individuals named in Latin on the sides—Cynegils, Cynewulf, Ecgbert, Aethelwulf, Eadred, Edmund, Cnut, William Rufus, Bishop Wine, Bishop Alwine and Queen Emma of Normandy—together with others who aren't listed. The remains, which have been radiocarbon dated and are being reinterred according to date, are from the late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman period, although the chests date from the 16th and 17th centuries. The passage of the remains through the centuries has been far from smooth. They are thought to have survived the demolition of the Anglo-Saxon Old Minster, the current cathedral's predecessor, and the 1642 ransacking by Oliver Cromwell's forces.

Sir Hubert von Herkomer's focus on representation of an individual's character above 'mere' likeness-making is reflected in his portrait of his uncle Anton Herkomer, *Anton the weaver* (*right*, about 1899). Anton, celebrated for his fine hand weaving, wove the fabrics for the upholstery and curtains that von Herkomer designed for Lululaund, a vast house in Bushey, Hertfordshire, which functioned as a studio, art school, theatre and early film studio and which was built thanks to the wealth accrued from von Herkomer's painting. The artist (1849–1914) established his reputation in the field of social realism, but his subsequent concentration on portraiture of people of all classes is examined in 'Portraits by Hubert von Herkomer' at Bushey Museum (January 24–July 26). At his peak, the prolific artist was completing three sittings a day, such was the demand and his own energy. Among the fashionable figures who sat for him were John Ruskin, Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Terry and Thomas Hardy *Jack Watkins*

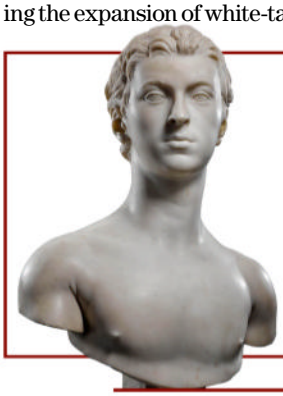
Shutterstock; Getty; University of Stirling; Oliver Akers Douglas; Alamy; Will Pryce/Future Plc; Winchester Cathedral; Historic England Archive

Trust plans for bibliophiles



THE National Trust will be making the libraries at a few of its properties more accessible to visitors in the future. Towards the end of the year, book lovers visiting Wightwick Manor in the West Midlands, Powis Castle in mid Wales, Kingston Lacy in Dorset and Upton House in Warwickshire will be invited to read items from the archives (although not from historical collections) in reading rooms. The move forms part of the Trust's Discovery Houses Programme and is one of the 2026 initiatives unveiled to coincide with the announcement of a record £10 million unrestricted donation from philanthropist Humphrey Battcock.

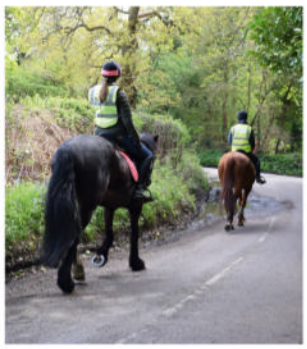
Species recovery is also on the Trust's agenda and, this year, it will be supporting the expansion of white-tailed eagles further into England and Wales, the release of more beavers and the restoration of hazel-dormouse populations; live broadcasts in towns and cities will bring 'Nature's stars' into public spaces. Play facilities will be increased; the Trust's first forest garden—at Shugborough in Staffordshire—will be opened; and its Sky Gardening Challenge, which offers assistance with greening balconies and window boxes, will be launched nationwide. Additionally, 500 places will have their 'eco' infrastructure upgraded, including Stourhead, where solar PV panels and air-source heat pumps will be installed. Later in the year, the Trust also aims to take on operational management of Heartlands in Cornwall, a 19-acre heritage regeneration site that is home to Robinson's Engine House.



Export bar on key sculpture

A 1728 marble bust of Scottish politician John Gordon of Invergordon that was sculpted by Edmé Bouchardon in Rome, Italy, has become the subject of an export bar. Valued at £3.1 million, it is one of only two classicising marble busts of British male sitters by the French sculptor, which makes it key to understanding the development of 18th-century British portraiture

Horse road deaths raised in Parliament



MPs are calling for action over equine road safety

HORSES are injured or killed on Britain's roads on a daily basis, MPs heard during a Westminster Hall debate last week. Liberal Democrat MP Lee Dillon, who secured the debate, together with other MPs, called on the Government to strengthen Highway Code rules on the passing of horses on roads, as well as improving driver training and education. The recently published Road Safety Strategy, Mr Dillon stated, 'missed some relatively straightforward opportunities to better protect horses and riders'. Issues raised during the debate included the emotional distress caused by such incidents; motorists' lack of awareness of safe rural driving; the suggested introduction of localised speed limits in horsey areas; the lack of access to—and poorly maintained—bridleways; ringfencing support for safety campaigns; and requesting that Forestry England reviews its newly introduced fees for carriage drivers; plus ensuring that there is equestrian representation on the new Road Safety Board. Mr Dillon went on to urge that 'all equestrian users are fully included in the Government's road-safety ambitions, not just in principle, but in practice'.

Country Mouse

The January survival guide

T. S. Eliot thought April was the cruellest month. In his poem *The Wasteland*, he reckoned 'Winter kept us warm, covering/Earth in forgetful snow, feeding/A little life with dried tubers'. Others might disagree, especially the residents of west Cornwall clearing up after Storm Goretti or those in Kent coping with disgracefully intermittent water supplies. Here, in these rural parts, we have to make our own fun during what feels like the longest, soggiest month: recent entertainments have been wassail night and the pub-quiz league, in which teams within a 12-mile radius check out their rivals' local beer, sausages and egg sandwiches, as well as their brain power.

January does have highlights. Here is a selection to get you through it: hyacinths smelling sweetly on the kitchen windowsill; the Moon visible through bare trees; not doing Dry January or Veganuary (due to mulled cider, venison and pheasant casseroles, plus haggis and whisky on Burns Night); ITV Racing; anticipating bulbs; the blissful emptiness of the landscape after the festive season; Tom Hiddleston in *The Night Manager* and Alec Guinness in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* currently on BBC iPlayer (some of us didn't have television in 1979); quiet roads; a mimosa in full, brilliant yellow bloom; the steady, incremental lengthening of days. **KG**

Town Mouse

Sleep and stimulation

JANUARY always gets off to a slow start, as if the world struggles after the holiday to return to the routines that we are pleased to describe as normality. Last week, however, it felt as if the focus and energy had returned once again to the capital. The Underground was uncomfortably busy once more, there were events to attend and the weekly timetable of filing copy and reading proofs firmly reasserted itself. In St James's Park, the early appearance of daffodils is a reminder—part welcome, part alarming—that the new spring will soon be upon us.

At home, there have been sharply different experiences of the start of term. One of the children has been plunged into the world of mock exams and, as a means of focusing on revision between papers, has been working in libraries and cafés around town. In the process, I discover, they have started drinking coffee. The other child, by contrast, has just enjoyed a birthday and seems so laid back as to be horizontal. Quite literally so, in fact. One morning last week, they managed to sleep in and arrived late for school. There was a brave attempt to point the finger of blame at the alarm clock, but the real cause is simply an enviable teenage ability to sleep through it. **JG**

Town & Country Notebook

Edited by Agnes Stamp

Quiz of the week

1) What does the acronym SCUBA stand for?
2) Which native British breed is also known as the 'orchard pig'?
3) The Fields Medal is awarded to scholars under the age of 40 in which discipline?
4) A satirical print by which English artist depicts the horrors of London's 18th-century 'gin craze'?
5) In which sitcom does Jennifer Saunders play a public relations consultant called Edina Monsoon?

Riddle me this

I have three feet, but no arms or legs. What am I?

100 years ago in COUNTRY LIFE January 16, 1926

FOR some years past concern has been felt in some quarters at the haphazard systems of breeding which are in force in different parts of the country. The country markets are filled with many different classes of stock. There are usually some good specimens, as also a large number of average cattle, but it is, unfortunately, true that a great many 'scrub' beasts are found. According to all accepted principles of breeding, the bull is half the herd. If miserable beasts are on view in our markets, they point to careless or ill-considered mating. Unthrifty cattle are good neither for the purchaser nor for the wellbeing of the country. They are profit-wasters, and, as such, are calculated to be a drag on agricultural prosperity.

1) Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus 2) Gloucester Old Spot 3) Mathematics 4) William Hogarth 5) 'Absolutely Fabulous'. Riddle me this: A yardstick

Rhapsody in blue

Kerry blue

THE Kerry Blues sound something like a dance or a fit of despondency,' COUNTRY LIFE quipped in 1928, 'but they are neither, merely being the blue terriers, named after the picturesque Irish county.' With its glamorous silky coat and feisty persona, the breed was formerly common in all parts of Ireland, used for herding sheep and cattle, exterminating vermin, finding and retrieving game, guarding property and dogfighting. The breed appeared in the Crufts show ring in 1922 and early types were described across these pages as 'quarrel-picking rapscallions, with their rounded skulls, bright eyes twinkling through their shaggy forelocks, flashing white teeth'. By the 1950s, we noted that the breed was 'more disciplined', benefiting from 'external smartening up', resulting in a 'strong, active independent dog, with a tremendous loyalty to his own family, their possessions and a strong sense of playfulness'. Irish revolutionary and nationalist leader Michael Collins, who owned a Kerry blue called Convict 224, tried to get the breed adopted as Ireland's national dog. Despite a Kerry blue called Torums Scarf Michael's winning Crufts in 2000, the breed remains on the vulnerable native breeds list.

From 'Country Life's Book of Dogs' (Rizzoli, £50)

Time to buy

Green Leaf Travel Dog Bed: 100% cotton mat handmade in Suffolk, from £70, (www.debbo anddaughters.co.uk)

Copper Trowel: with an ashwood handle and a useful depth measure in metric and imperial on the blade, £16.50, Cox & Cox (0330 333 2123; www.coxandcox.co.uk)

On this day... January 21, 1976

Concorde's first passenger services took to the skies, with British Airways (BA) flying from London to Bahrain and Air France operating a route from Paris to Rio de Janeiro. The BA plane, carrying guests that included The Duke of Kent, knocked one-third off the usual flight time and landed 20 minutes early; the Air France service arrived half an hour late.

A novel note

'Think not,
is my eleventh
commandment; and
sleep when you can,
is my twelfth'
Moby-Dick or, The Whale,
Herman Melville

Poet's corner

'The moon's soft
golden meshes make
All night a veil;
The shore-lamps
in the sleeping lake
Laburnum
tendrils trail'
Alone,
James Joyce

Alamy; Chuhail/Dreamstime.com; Pieter Huys, *The Descent into Limbo*, Compton Verney; Annabelle King/Future Plc

The taste of Britain
Pembrokeshire: Laverbread

WHEN is a bread not a bread? When it's made from seaweed: *Porphyra umbilicalis*, to be precise, a succulent red algae that, boiled and blended (and sometimes then cooked into patties), becomes a historic staple of Welsh cooked breakfasts, dubbed 'Welshman's caviar' by none other than Richard Burton. The 1753 first edition of *A supplement to Mr. Chambers's Cyclopædia* refers to it as 'a sort of food made of a sea plant', which was held to be curative of various distempers of the liver and spleen. Our understanding of laverbread's nutritional benefits might be more advanced now (it's rich in iron and iodine), but its manufacture has hardly changed since COUNTRY LIFE's roving reporter John L. Jones visited south Pembrokeshire in May 1984 to observe local residents gathering 'luxuriant fronds' of laver from rocks between the high and low watermarks. Mr Jones reported similar operations taking place on the west coast of Scotland and southern Ireland, 'where [the seaweed] is known as sloke', but today laverbread has Protected Designation of Origin status, with each hand-plucked batch of fresh laver being allocated a unique traceability code. Not for nothing did the *Western Mail* describe it as being 'as Welsh as our unspoilt rolling moorlands, mellifluous male voice choirs and long place names'. *EH*

Illustration by Kateryna Kyslitska

Unmissable events

January 23–April 26 'The Legacy of Mary, Queen of Scots', A. K. Bell Library, Perth, Perth and Kinross-shire. Running concurrently with Perth Museum's display of Queen Mary's last letter (written before her execution in 1587 at Fotheringhay Castle, Northamptonshire), this exhibition explores her influence beyond her final words (01738 632488; https://perthmuseum.co.uk)

January 31–May 10 'People Watching', Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, Dorchester. Drawing on about 50 works from 1915 until the present day, this exhibition—featuring the work of artists including David Remfry and Dame Barbara Hepworth—explores the concept of image and portraiture in British art (01305 262735; www.dorsetmuseum.org)

February 7–March 8 'Orchids', Princess of Wales Conservatory, Kew Gardens, Surrey. Inspired by China's biodiversity, heritage and design traditions, this year's orchid festival sees Kew's glass labyrinth filled with dragons, lanterns, intricate plant sculptures and large-scale floral installations (020–8332 5655; www.kew.org)

Book now February 10 'Awaken the Maker' block-printing workshop, The Double Red Duke, Clanfield, Oxfordshire. Discover the art of block printing with printmaker and textile designer Molly Mahon, bringing ideas to life on cushion covers. Includes a three-course lunch (01367 810222; www.countrycreatures.com)

Until February 22 'The Shelter of Stories: Ways of Telling, Ways of Dwelling' (*pictured*), Compton Verney Art Gallery & Park, Warwickshire. Bringing together historic pieces and contemporary works, this exhibition considers the art of storytelling and how myths, tales and works of art can foster a sense of belonging (01926 645500; www.comptonverney.org.uk)

Wine o'clock

Aged in concrete

Zuccardi, Poligonos Altamira Malbec, Uco Valley, Mendoza, Argentina, 2023. £26, Sainsbury's, alc 14%

Part of the Zuccardi family's Poligonos range of Uco Valley 'village wines', this is sourced from fruit grown at 3,609ft in Paraje Altamira and fermented and aged in concrete. It's an absolute delight—elegant, fragrant, silky textured and pure. ***Visit www.decanter.com***

Time for tea

Organic lavender and valerian

By late January, the light begins to shift and the air feels alive again. You may feel this is a moment to slow down, not rush ahead. A cup of Hampstead Tea's lavender and valerian captures that sense of gentle restoration. Both herbs are biodynamically grown and blended to produce an infusion that seems to soothe the mind as it hints at spring. Original tea comes only from the camellia bush, but these herbal infusions have become accepted as tisanes or, more casually, 'tea'. Such caffeine-free infusions are often drunk later in the day, displacing wine as part of a trend away from alcohol. Each cup reflects the company's belief that 'nature, when treated with respect, gives back more than it takes'. Similarly, more so than wine, how the liquor gives back rests mostly in your hands, in how you brew. Learn to enjoy the ritual.

How to serve

Steep one teabag in freshly boiled water for five minutes. Drink warm before bed or in the afternoon.

Where to buy

Hampstead Tea sells 20 sachets for £3.79 (www.hampsteadtea.com). Alternatively, try Booths (www.booths.co.uk) or a local farm shop.

Jonathon Jones tastes tea and exports English-grown tea worldwide

Stuff & nonsense

Will Hosie

Say 'I do' to winter nuptials

NAME one person whose summer wardrobe is better than their winter one. Go on, it'll be fun. Harder than it sounds, isn't it? Now, try the same exercise with something else. Food: better in winter. Fireplaces: better in winter. Spooning: better in winter. Let us consider, then, the virtues of the winter wedding, with its faint promise of snow and the gumption required to swan through it in heels. I'm far from the only person with a soft spot for the genre: 20% of British weddings now take place in the colder months, and that figure is growing. 'We've seen a notable spike in the number of winter weddings this past year,' says Pink Squire, a publicist and co-founder of a wedding-planning firm with gallerist Edie Jones. 'There's a lot to be said for elegant dresses draped in furs and for turning a bleak January into a beautiful honeymoon period.'

A ceremony on a ski slope may be slightly off-*piste*, but winter weddings are on the up

When it comes to wintry weddings, the country is the clear winner, with farmsteads and country houses a popular choice for those who want a roaring fire inside and a mist to envelop outdoor proceedings. It's also an economical choice, akin to travelling off-peak or going skiing in May—an increasingly tough call for the same reason that winter weddings are growing in demand. As James Carville nearly said: it's the climate, stupid. Besides the occasional cold snap, winter in Britain has become more palatable; mild enough that you won't freeze during the ceremony, yet cool enough that you needn't worry about mopping your forehead on the dance floor.

Those tying the knot in December can also bank on their entire family being present, as they would have gathered for Christmas at that time anyway. The upside, for those whose families are 'a lot', is that their annual family meet is kept to only one. Hannah Gräfin von Waldersee, a wedding planner in New York, US, says a winter wedding stands out for all the right reasons. 'Because it gets darker earlier, you have more options to play with fireworks, lights and projections,' she notes. For those planning a wedding at short notice, 'a winter date has the best chance of getting a high response rate'—a reward for those who've chosen their friends wisely over the years.

Rejoice for winter nuptials, then: keep the fireplace well stocked and the good times flowing.

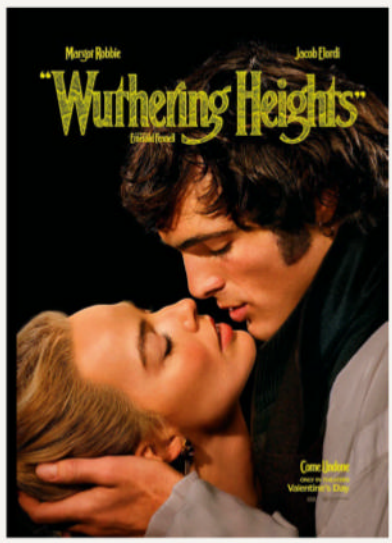
A sloe burn

'Look at this,' said my friend Patrick the other week, thrusting his phone under my nose. 'I can't see what you're showing me, Pat. Stop waving it around. Calm down!' It was a picture of the menu at Rochelle Canteen in Shoreditch, E2. 'Went with the fam,' Pat mooed. 'But look. Look *here*.' There, at the top of the page where they list the drinks for the day, were our four favourite words in the English language. 'Oh my,' I replied. 'How many did you have?'

Sloe gin and tonic has become the drink of the season. The berries (*above*) enjoyed a bumper harvest last year (*'Life in the sloe lane', September 24, 2025*), so it's no surprise they are more abundant and popular than ever. Achieved by infusing classic gin with sugar and sloes in a sealed jar, the mixture is best paired with a lemon or elderflower tonic. If you've not yet broken your Dry January, let this be the drink that tempts you.

What you might have missed

One of my favourite participants in the current season of *The Traitors* is James, a gardener from Dorset. He emits countless theories about who the different traitors might be, pointing the finger in a new direction in each episode, and is the proud possessor of an extraordinary pair of sideburns. It's official: mutton chops are back. The best-known ambassador of the oft-maligned facial hair was *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr Darcy. ('I seriously believe you should rethink the length of your sideburns,' Bridget Jones told her very own Darcy in 2001.) Although Austen-mania is on the wane following the 250th anniversary of the author's birth last year, the aesthetic embodied by her male characters is on the ascent. In three weeks' time, Jacob Elordi will grace cinema screens as Emily Brontë's Heathcliff (*below*), complete with a brooding Yorkshire accent and sideburns down to his knees. Okay, not quite: they end just below his cheekbones. A shame in his case, as they're so sharp.



Getty; Alamy

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Letters to the Editor

Mark Hedges

Letter of the week

Play your cards right

AS thoughts turn to travel in 2026, can I urge your readers to rediscover the simple pleasure of sending postcards from their jaunts, regardless of duration or location? It's always cheering to find a handwritten postcard amid the bills and other humdrum envelopes on the doormat and composing and posting them is great fun, too. A message on a postcard, however brief, says 'I'm thinking of you': a human touch that matters more than ever in an increasingly impersonal digital world.
Kevin Duffy, Manchester

The writer of the letter of the week will win a bottle of Pol Roger Brut Réserve Champagne

Core values

FOLLOWING your piece on the history of the Bramley apple (*Town & Country Notebook*, *December 31, 2025*), your readers might be interested to learn that Southwell Minster has a beautiful window in the North Transept dedicated to the fruit (*right*), installed to mark the bicentenary of Britain's favourite cooking apple. It was given by Roger Merryweather and his sister Celia Steven, the great-grandchildren of Henry Merryweather, who grew the first commercial Bramley trees. The window was designed by Helen Whittaker of the Barley Studio, York, and features the Bramley growing on the Tree of Life.
Sarah Machin, Nottinghamshire

Picture this

AS a woman of a certain age, I enjoyed savouring memories through the images in your photographic feature ('*Shoot for the stars*', *January 7*). I can remember being allowed to stay up late to watch Neil Armstrong walk on the Moon, made even more wonderful as it was only me and my father. The three images that to this day reduce me to tears are, firstly our late Elizabeth II at the funeral of her beloved husband, 'Earthrise', which is still awe inspiring, and, finally, the service dog (*above*) who became depressed when he couldn't find any survivors.
Christine Tyrer, by email

Training plan

ONE of my best Christmas presents this year was your December 24 issue featuring the superbly researched and illustrated series of articles about the history of our railways. Many thanks from a lifelong train enthusiast—this issue is going non-stop into my railway library!
Adrian Holmes, London

Original thinking

THANK you so much for the inspiring profile of Portmeirion (*'A peculiar genius'*, *January 7*). I well recall exploring its cliff walks and quirky buildings as a child in the 1960s, when every new vista and unexpected juxtaposition elicited not only smiles, but delighted laughter—surely as Sir Clough Williams-Ellis intended. It would have been nice to have a photograph of him in his bright yellow stockings and plus-fours (*above*) to grace your article. He was a true one-off, exactly like hiscreation. *Dr Mark Bellis, Essex*

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Alamy; Courtesy of Portmeirion Ltd; Getty

Crying Woolf

IN her potted history of Portmeirion (*January 7*), Kathryn Ferry uses the withering words of a 1920s Design and Industries Association Yearbook: 'bungaloid growths'. Given the Bloomsbury Group adjacency, perhaps Virginia Woolf's own acerbic musings on the destruction of the countryside and scenic sites might be of use, too. In *Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car*, Woolf (*below*) writes how '[t]he freckle of red villas on the coast is washed over by a thin lucid lake of brown air, in which they and their redness are drowned'. Meanwhile, in *Middlebrow*: 'red brick villas […] have been built by middlebrows so that middlebrows might look at the view'.
Thomas Rodgers Endersby, Buckinghamshire

Flying solo

AHEAD of spring mating, more ladybirds than ever are wintering inside our window frames. This loveliness, to use the collective noun—plus stains and smell—is less welcome in the curtain folds. Meanwhile, COUNTRY LIFE's solo, gadabout ladybird remains chaste. How come?
Sue Balsom, Ceredigion

COUNTRY LIFE
JANUARY 28

Celebrating a British design classic: the red telephone box at 100. Plus nose-to-tail eating, the aromas of Nature, ocean sunfish, work in art, barn owls and James Bond

We know our 'rights'

EVERYONE is thrilled when they find a village pub that provides good unpretentious food: no deep-frozen microwaved products, but the real thing, produced on the premises, from local produce, by a proper chef. It's a place to which, once discovered, we'll come back again and again. It is exactly the kind of village pub that Agromenes had in mind when he highlighted the damage done by Rachel Reeves's taxes. However, in researching that issue he discovered another plague afflicting hospitality businesses.

In a pub where everything is made on the spot, people with allergies have to have their food prepared wholly separately in a part of the kitchen that has been specially washed down for each customer. That is not easy, but most are happy to help, not only because it is the law, but because they understand that if you love food, having an allergy must be a real trial, not to mention life threatening in some cases.

> 'We encourage the belief that nothing is our fault, there's always someone else to blame'

The trouble comes when people who don't like the taste of something *call* it an allergy and so put the kitchen to all that trouble and cost simply because they dislike peas. You *can* be allergic to peas, but it is very rare, and if it's merely a preference, it shouldn't be called an allergy. This misuse has become more common because of current regulations. Hospitality businesses feel they have to insist on asking customers whether they have any allergies. Most of us—luckily—find this an annoying interruption, but it's more than that. It encourages the misuse of the word allergy. It also puts responsibility in the wrong place. If you suffer from a real allergy, *you* have to make sure the pub staff know. Only then does the responsibility shift. Otherwise we encourage the belief that nothing is our fault, there's always someone else to blame.

This sloughing off of responsibility—in many fields—often lands others with a cost. The first question ought to be, who pays? This is particularly relevant when the Government produces ideas such as extending the 'right to roam'. This will suggest that wild swimmers and 'paddlers' should be given unrestricted access to England's rivers and waterways. Last week, BBC's *Countryfile* programme covered the issue, but never asked the proponents who will pay. Riparian landowners have legal responsibilities and restrictions and they carry the cost. There are thousands of anglers who purchase fishing licences and they and the landowners nurture and protect the fish. Many watercourses contain important biodiversity, which owners, volunteers and charities protect and enhance at considerable cost. Who is going to pay for the loss of business, fishing opportunities and privacy that unrestricted access would entail?

There is no general right to use rivers and waterways. Most are covered by rights to private property, safeguarded by law and international treaties. Merely stating you have a right isn't a rational argument, but it reflects an attitude that asserts rights for which others should pay and insists that any inconvenience or even downright harm that is caused is not the responsibility of those who have rights.

These are emanations of a view bred by the treatise *The Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine, whose earlier pamphlets helped spawn the French and American revolutions. It encouraged people to dissociate rights from duties, yet it is our duty towards others that is the very basis of their rights. A society that concentrated on our duties would be much more likely to create the conditions that ensured rights were respected and enhanced. On its 250-year anniversary, the US, product of Paine, might reflect on how much better would be a world where the strong recognised their duties instead of insisting on their 'rights'.

Athena
Cultural Crusader

Don't old towns need saving?

LAST autumn, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government welcomed the publication of an independent report that recommended the locations of 12 new towns across the country. The relevant statement went on to promise that development would begin on 'at least three new towns in this Parliament', as well as 'a far larger range of locations if it proves possible'. In the meantime, a determined initiative to clear a way for as much development as possible through our creaking planning system is under way. Despite such efforts, whether this target of three new towns is any more plausible than the Government's overarching pledge to build 1.5 million new houses in the same period remains to be seen.

New towns have an irresistible appeal for policymakers and proposals for them have been a regular feature of national planning initiatives in recent years. At a fundamental level, they promise to create large numbers of houses rapidly. In addition, for politicians, there is the grandeur of the gesture that attracts (although, in reality, several of the proposed sites in the recent report are 'densifications' of existing settlements). For developers, meanwhile, there is the promise of working at scale on unencumbered sites.

> 'The focus on new towns risks overlooking the ones we have already have'

Athena is no fixed enemy of new towns, but she is cautious about them. Planning regulations may be tiresome and make it hard to build properties at speed, but simply setting them aside comes with serious long-term risks. These include creating the wrong kind of settlements with the wrong facilities in the wrong places, not to mention the challenge of ensuring that commercial developers with a short-term interest in the property they build work to a high standard. Added to which, there remains remarkably little consensus as to what form new towns should take; love or hate Poundbury in Dorset, it certainly challenges received orthodoxies. There is also the reality of the unwelcome impact that new towns can have on existing landscape and heritage. Such is the case, for example, with the redevelopment of the former airbase at RAF Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire, one of the 12 proposed locations, next to Rousham (*Town & Country, October 22 and 29, 2025*).

Yet what most frustrates Athena about the Government's focus on new towns is that, for the sake of speed and bold headlines, it risks overlooking the ones that we have already. Far too many towns across Britain have been ruthlessly hollowed out and stand in urgent need of renewal. Such revival is complex to manage, but our existing urban centres have vast potential—through the redevelopment of derelict retail units and the conversion of empty property, notably floors over shops and disused office space—to provide new housing at scale. These places already possess infrastructure, transport and character. A new town, by contrast, leaves our inherited problems intact. Yes, build new towns properly if we need them, but aren't the ones we have already worth saving first?

The way we were Photographs from the COUNTRY LIFE archive

1927 Published May 7

A view of 'a shelter' at the rabbit farm at Winkfield, Berkshire. It illustrated an article by Lady Rachel Byng on the complexity of producing Angora wool. She describes a system of shearing or plucking the animals four times a year. Keeping the rabbits indoors was thought to encourage the growth of longer coats.

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Country Life Picture Library

My favourite painting Philippa Gregory

The Family of Henry VIII, British school

***The Family of Henry VIII*, about 1545, oil on canvas, 57in by 140in, by unknown artist, Hampton Court Palace, Surrey**

Philippa Gregory is a historian and author. Her latest book, *Boleyn Traitor*, is out now

'This is a very famous portrait of Henry VIII: it shows him sitting next to Jane Seymour, by then dead many years–almost a decade–with an arm around his son, Edward, his two daughters on either side and, beyond them, glimpses of the Great Garden of Whitehall with the King's heraldic beasts mounted on columns. We can also see some royal servants. The man on the right is the King's fool, Will Somers, and on the other side is Princess Mary's resident fool–a woman–and that's a unique sighting, as she's hardly ever mentioned in history. So, in the background you have these extraordinary characters, then in the foreground the Royal Family. The portrait is thought to have been painted at the time when Henry had restored the princesses Mary and Elizabeth to the line of succession, but, carefully, they're shown as if they are waiting in the wings, at some distance from the King and his true heir'

Charlotte Mullins comments on *The Family of Henry VIII*

FOR many years, this painting was attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger, the German-Swiss Renaissance artist who first moved to London in the 1520s and worked at the Court of Henry VIII throughout the 1530s. However, Holbein died in 1543 and the work is now believed to date from about 1545. Aspects of it support its reattribution—the lack of foreshortening on Henry VIII's left sleeve, for example. However, the painting's unknown artist was certainly heavily influenced by Holbein, in particular his majestic mural in the Privy Chamber in the King's primary residence of Whitehall Palace in London. Although that is no longer extant, following a devastating fire that swept through the palace in 1698, several copies exist and the mural was clearly used as a source for the faces of Henry and Jane in this painting. The young Edward, aged about eight when *The Family of Henry VIII* was completed, stands in a pose that mirrors that of his father in the mural—his legs spread wide and his shoulders exaggerated.

This splendid oil, which still hangs in Hampton Court, is nearly 12ft wide and draws upon Holbein's technique of stationing sitters in shallow spaces to ensure we concentrate on their features and actions. The ornate gilded colonnade helps focus our attention on Henry VIII's children and their place in the Tudor succession, but also offers us a glimpse of the King's world. Through two archways, the oppressive interior gives way to views of the palace grounds, Westminster Abbey and the King's beloved tennis court.

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Parham House, West Sussex

A domestic bestiary

EMMA BARNARD stands in the Great Hall of Parham House, begun in 1577. In the background are some of the familiar treasures in the Parham collection, including the 1610 portrait of Henry, Prince of Wales. On the table, however, is a more modest, but delightful object, a shell lion thought to have been made in the 17th century. It was collected by her great-grandmother Alicia Pearson, who restored the property with her husband, Clive, from 1922.

'He has a huge Cheshire Cat grin,' she observes, 'because he has caught some sort of goat, which he has firmly under his paw. He lives under the State Saddle of James II in a glass case in the Long Gallery, with his back to the room. There's a window seat next to him—my great-grandmother put him there to give anyone who sits down for a quick rest something to look at.' The lion is one in a whole bestiary of quirky animals incorporated into the building. Lady Emma continues: 'There is a dodo, llama and "sea cow"—which looks like a cow, not a manatee—in the 1930s Great Parlour plasterwork and, to keep the lion company in the Long Gallery, Oliver Messel's painted ceiling includes a monkey and a very surprised-looking owl.'

Visit www.parhaminsussex.co.uk

Photographs by Richard Cannon

'He has a huge Cheshire Cat grin, because he has caught some sort of goat'

The legacy William Robinson and the wild garden

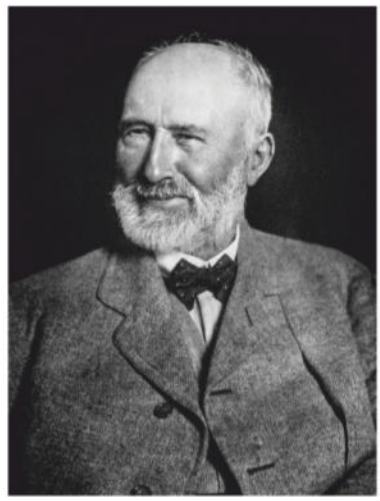
A golden tribute: thousands of narcissus on the slopes of Gravetye Manor in West Sussex are a living reminder of William Robinson

In memoriam

In *God's Acre Beautiful Or The Cemeteries of the Future* (1880), Robinson advocated cremation (urns taking up less space than graves) and he designed the 12-acre, Grade I-listed Memorial Gardens at Golders Green Crematorium, the first in London, which opened in 1902. 'The cemetery of the future,' he wrote, 'must not only be a garden in the best sense of the word, but the most beautiful and most cared for of all gardens.'

LONG before anyone dreamt up the slogan No Mow May, the Irish-born Victorian gardener, writer and publisher William Robinson was urging gardeners to let the grass grow. In *The Wild Garden Or Our Groves and Gardens made Beautiful by the Naturalisation of the Hardy Exotic* (1870), he declared that 'mowing the grass once a fortnight in pleasure grounds, as now practised, is a great and costly mistake'. It was far better to mimic Nature and plant things where they would be happy and become naturalised: turkscap lilies along a woodland walk, wild roses up old trees, little alpines in rocky ruins, herbaceous peonies in long grass. If this sounds thoroughly modern, that is because we have come full circle and are rediscovering what Robinson knew more than 150 years ago.

He railed against much of what was orthodox: carpet bedding, flowers grown in straight lines, over-manicured beds, the annual autumn digging of shrubberies, which only disturbed roots and prevented little woodlanders taking hold. The plants he recommended read like a list of those of today—grasses, wildflowers, such as mullein, species daffodils, American prairie plants, including Monarda, even Japanese knotweed... he didn't get everything right. Robinson had an eye for publishing also, tapping into the growing enthusiasm for gardening among the middle classes with two magazines: *The Garden*, founded in 1871 (and acquired by COUNTRY LIFE publisher Edward Hudson in 1900), was followed by *Gardening Illustrated*.



A gardener ahead of his time: Robinson (1838–1935) advocated planting that mimicked Nature

At his home, Gravetye Manor, an Elizabethan house in West Sussex that he bought in 1884 'as a poor farm' (COUNTRY LIFE, *March 23, 1918*), all his theories were put into practice. On the slopes and in the woodlands thrived thousands of narcissus; autumn crocus, camassias and scarlet windflowers grew in the grass; hepaticas and lily-of-the-valley spread themselves through the copses; fritillaries, leucojum, day lilies and water forget-me-not put down roots beside water.

On the slope above the manor, he built a magnificent elliptical walled kitchen garden (*'Through the garden gates', page 62*) and close by the house a flower garden of 'Tea and China roses underplanted with pinks, carnations, forget-me-nots and perennial pansies'. This living legacy is now cared for by Tom Coward, head gardener at Gravetye Manor. *TD*

Marianne Majerus Garden Images; Alamy

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Feat of clay

Once you have noticed the texture on a hand-thrown flowerpot, it's impossible to use factory made again, says **Tiffany Daneff**, after a visit to Whichford Pottery in Warwickshire

Photographs Mark Williamson

EACH month, 20 tons of raw clay (much of it from a pit seven miles away) is delivered to Whichford Pottery near Shipston-on-Stour in Warwickshire. Before it can be thrown onto a wheel, the clay will be put through an obstacle course of processes to ensure the resulting terracotta flowerpots will be of the right porosity for the plants and, crucially, that they will be frost proof. It's this attention to detail that has made Whichford—founded in 1976 by Jim Keeling, together with his wife, Dominique—the only surviving pottery in the country producing hand-thrown flowerpots at scale.

Whichford, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, will be a familiar name to many gardeners who return again and again to buy its pot and planters: once you have noticed the texture and feel of hand-thrown terracotta, it's impossible to go back to factory made. As Alan Titchmarsh, who commissioned Whichford to make him a terracotta statue of Humphrey Repton, says: 'To find such craftsmanship in terracotta today is rare. Jim Keeling and his team have the rare ability to combine the beautiful with the useful, which is immensely pleasing. The fact that their pots do not succumb to frost makes them matchless as far as I am concerned.'

> 'Waiting to be fired is a set of giant contemporary pots for Jimmy Choo'

As well as throwing classic pans and half pans and decorated flowerpots in every shape and size you can think of, Whichford undertakes private commissions. These range from making a funeral urn for Vidal Sassoon—from a design by Anish Kapoor to be placed under the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London—to a giant pie dish with a whale on top for the chef Heston Blumenthal. Standing on pallets today, waiting to be fired, is a set of giant contemporary pots for Jimmy Choo. And when help was needed with producing hundreds of thousands of ceramic poppies for the Tower of London in 2014, Whichford came to the rescue.

'We made and bisque-fired them and sent them back to Stoke… 12 of us working five

Preceding pages: **Whichford Pottery founder Jim Keeling learned the traditional 'three pull technique' of English country potters as an apprentice at A. Harris & Sons in Surrey and is passing on his skills to a new generation.** *Left:* **Master potter Adam Keeling**

Left: **New decorations are drawn by Mr Keeling Snr and transferred to plaster moulds of varying sizes.** *Above:* **Some of the roulettes that are rolled along the side of a pot to leave a decorative imprint—an innovation introduced by Mr Keeling, who created the designs**

days a week, hand producing more poppies than the factory,' recalls Mr Keeling's son, Adam, who, like his father, is a master potter.

After reading history and archeology at Cambridge—where Mr Keeling Snr had been inspired to learn how to pot by the highly decorated early Islamic earthenware he had excavated on digs in Persia—he apprenticed himself at £13 a week to two old potters at A. Harris & Sons in Wrecclesham, near Farnham in Surrey. Here, he learned the 'three pull technique', a method that has been handed down and refined through generations of English country potters. He devoted many years to his kick wheel, which is powered by a foot pedal, rather than electricity. 'It takes longer to master, but it makes you understand the connections between the brain, the foot and your hands,' says Mr Keeling. It is one thing working with small quantities of clay, but, if you want to make a large pot, these skills are essential. 'Pottery is the same as language, you need a vocabulary and, once you have mastered the basics, you can move on and begin to express yourself in a more skilled way, ' says Mr Keeling, who set up his pottery at a time when traditional potteries were closing down in the face of industrialisation. 'The idea,' he says, 'was to bring new life to that old English Country Pottery tradition.' That tradition had also suffered from the shift to single-studio potters, of whom Bernard Leach (1887–1979) is the notable example. 'The studio potters looked down on flowerpot makers as craftsmen, seeing themselves as artists.' Eventually, Mr Keeling explains, 'studio potteries outsourced their training to art schools and teaching lost touch with the old skills'. Whichford is attempting to get as many people as possible engaged in learning the traditional methods by training apprentices and has also started to offer foundation and higher courses where professionals can hone their skills.

> 'The idea was to bring new life to that old English Country Pottery tradition'

Tradition is combined with innovation, most obviously in the many decorative finishes Whichford has introduced. Sometimes, this is applied by the potter using a roulette, a hand tool with a clay wheel—each one designed and hand carved by Mr Keeling—that rolls out a decoration as the pot is turned on the wheel. Other pots are passed to the decorating team, who apply a plaster mould to the outside, pressing the wall of the unfired, still-workable clay from the inside into the mould to produce a foxglove, perhaps, or a peony. This was another innovation: the more usual technique of attaching the design to the outside of the pot risks it falling off in a frost. The shelves behind the decorators are stacked high with moulds, each of which has been designed and made by Mr Keeling.

His other key play was deciding right from the start to sell direct to gardeners, reserving wholesale for the RHS—with which he has collaborated for more than 40 years—and for →

Facing page: **The decoration applied to the palanquin and headdress of each Elephant Planter is unique.** *Above:* **The Whichford team with (*from left*) Dominique and Jim Keeling and their children Theodora and Adam, who are taking over the running of the pottery**

export, especially to Japan, where his earthenware has been imported for 35 years. This is a great compliment, as Japan takes pottery very seriously. Indeed, his latest project was inspired by regular visits to Japan, home of the ancient technique of Anagama firing, which is based in Bizen. The new woodfired kiln, which the Keelings built by hand with reused Bizen bricks, is a work of art in itself at 6ft high and 18ft long. Raw clay forms are carefully positioned so the flame and ash will create 'remarkable landscapes of colour and texture on the wares'. To celebrate Whichford's anniversary—which also sees Adam and his sister Theodora taking over the running of the pottery, as their sister Maia and her partner Christine run the café in the converted barn—the Keelings are launching a special edition of wood-fired flowerpots from the Anagama kiln, combining two ancient techniques to produce pots, no two of which will look the same. ➘

Whichford Pottery, Warwickshire (www.whichfordpottery.com)

Potsherds

- The first potter's wheel was invented about 5,000 years ago in what is now Iraq. Writing was first developed here, too—not entirely coincidentally, as the cuneiform script was created by pressing the stylus into tablets of wet clay that was left to dry in the sun
- A Bronze Age potter, wrote Jim Keeling in his first book *The Terracotta Gardener*, 'would recognise almost all the ways of "making" that I use at Whichford today'
- Old English potteries were always situated near to a clay pit, with itinerant potters setting up in different parts of the country
- By the 6th century, the great Roman potteries had disappeared, only to be resuscitated in the 15th century with the arrival of the Italian Renaissance
- It is the porous nature of terracotta that makes it vulnerable to frost, unless carefully prepared and fired at high temperatures
- In 1515, two cart-loads of 'pottes for the erberes' were driven to Hampton Court in Surrey, for head gardener John Chapman
- In the 16th century, English potteries made tableware and flowerpots. The following century saw a split between the more sophisticated Delft and stoneware, which was made in London, Bristol and Staffordshire, and the local pottery, which was producing ordinary homewares
- By the mid 19th century, the English Country Potteries were only making flowerpots and bricks
- In the 1950s, the first machines to make flowerpots were introduced from America and with them came mass-produced uniform terracotta flowerpots

Throw another log on the fire

Woodburning stoves are joining firepits in the garden as the jolliest way to keep the winter cold at bay, says **Amelia Thorpe**

← *Quattro formaggi* anyone?
If you haven't already erected a clay pizza oven in the garden, this will come as excellent news: a woodburning cast-iron stove that will not only keep you warm, but also cook pizzas the Italian way, nicely blistered and with a hint of wood smoke. The wonder is that no one has devised this genius combination before. The Cast-Iron Garden Stove costs £1,200 from Esse (01282 813235; www.esse.com)

↑ Feel the heat
We've been keeping snug indoors for years by stoking the flames of cast-iron stoves and staring at those steadily glowing embers, but who knew that they are just as much fun outdoors? The Clean Burn ML outdoor woodburner was designed for use in gardens and on terraces of all sizes and delivers controllable heat output with low emission levels and little or no smoke. It costs £2,400 from Chesneys (020–7627 1410; www.chesneys.co.uk)

→ Everything stops for tea
Winter gardeners will appreciate a break for a hot mug of proper tea and biscuits. This beautifully designed Japanese teapot is just the job for a decent brew (no teabags here). The Aizawa double-layered stainless-steel teapot, with integrated infusing basket, costs £99 and the Mustard Yellow Enamel mug is £18, both from Niwaki (01747 445059; www.niwaki.com)

← Strike it hot
How many matches does it take to light a fire outdoors? Quite a lot. You could roll your own spills, but Labour and Wait have gone one better. Handmade in the UK from rolled-up newspaper, dipped in beeswax and sprinkled with sawdust, these Beeswax Firelighters come in a pocket-sized tin, £10, from Labour and Wait (020–7729 6253; www.labourandwait.co.uk)

← Smart thinking
A firepit can quickly flare up, sending out sparks—not comfortable for anyone nearby. The answer is a fire that sits lower in the bowl, which is a good choice for windier spots in the garden. The Solex steel firepit, from £475, doubles as a barbecue with a height-adjustable swing-arm rack. From Firepits UK (01873 840777; www.firepitsuk.co.uk)

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Passing on the golden torch

David Carver is typical of the new generation of nursery owners, writes **John Hoyland**, determined to save historic collections and produce new hybrids

Photographs by Clive Nichols

THE world of specialist plant nurseries, treasure troves of unusual varieties and expert advice, has always been a fragile one, but the past few years have seen these havens of expertise more threatened than ever before. A combination of rising costs, retirement and brutal competition from large-scale producers has resulted in the closure of many of our cherished plant centres. This makes for disheartening times for those of us who love being introduced to new plants by passionate nurserymen and who stand in awe of the immense knowledge of these expert growers and breeders. No garden centre or commercial producer can ever know as much about the plants they sell, nor can they match the diversity of plants produced by specialist growers.

Grim as the situation may often seem, a few rays of sunshine are beginning to break through: a new generation of nursery owners, led by young plant enthusiasts, is emerging. Often working on a small scale, sometimes selling only online or from micro-nurseries and usually prioritising sustainable growing practices, all are committed to offering plants overlooked by the mainstream trade.

Typical of this courageous new breed is David Carver. In Buckland Monachorum, west Devon, Mr Carver recently embarked →

The miniature narcissus stock beds at David Carver's Buckland Cottage Garden in Buckland Monachorum, west Devon

Alec Grey daffodils

Alec Grey was one of the 20th century's most prolific breeders of daffodils, focusing mainly on miniature forms. Although some miniature daffodils existed before Grey began his work hybridising, it was his introductions that popularised the family and encouraged other breeders to explore the form. His first of hundreds of hybrids appeared in the 1930s and the last ones in the 1980s. Most of his introductions are available from specialist nurseries, but hybrids such as *Narcissus* 'Sun Disc', *N.* 'Jumblie' and *N.* 'Minnow' continue to be mainstays of commercial bulb catalogues. His most famous daffodil, *N.* 'Tête à Tête', was introduced in 1949 and enthusiastically received by gardeners. It has gone on to be one of the world's most popular daffodils and accounts for more than 30% of Dutch bulb production.

Grey died aged 90 in 1986 and his collection first went to Walter Wragg before being entrusted to Christine Skelmersdale of Broadleigh Gardens, who nurtured Grey's plants for several decades and has now passed them to David Carver, thus ensuring their survival for a new generation.

on the adventure of running a bulb nursery. 'At school, I was not academically brilliant, but I got a job as a gardener at Endsleigh Hotel, Devon,' he explains. 'There, I discovered how much I loved plants and gardens. I knew that I wanted to work with plants.'

> 'The Alec Grey cultivars have now joined David Carver's personal collection of species daffodils'

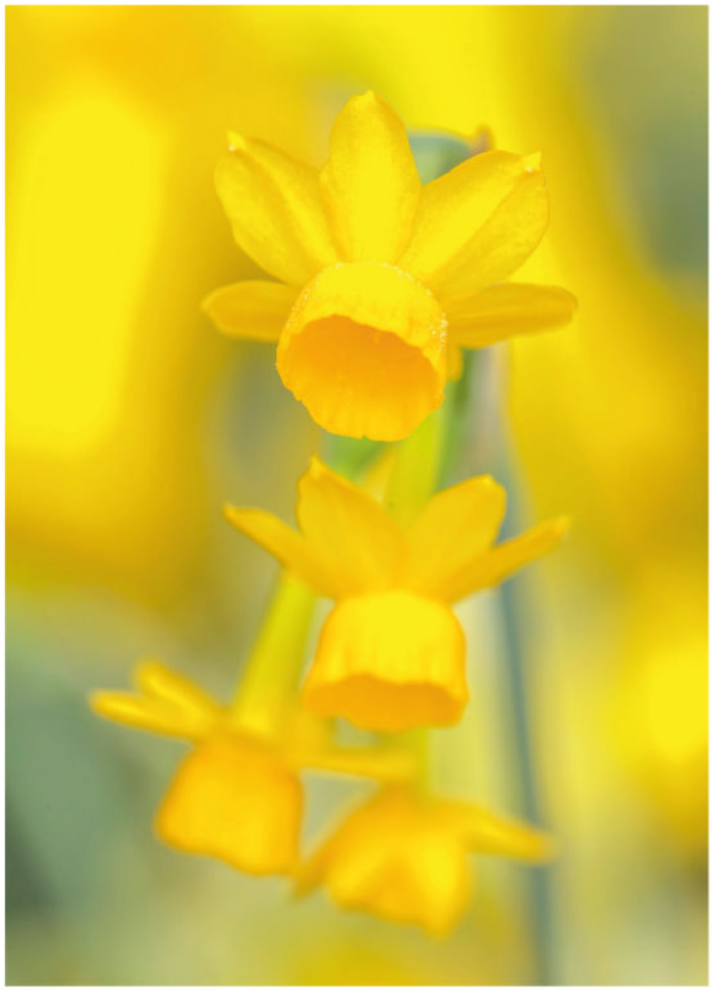
A visit to South Africa opened his eyes to the extent of the world of bulbs and, once back home, he started propagating small quantities to exhibit at Alpine Garden Society shows and to sell to other exhibitors. 'At these shows, I began to hear rumours about bulb nurseries planning to close and realised that their stock might disappear.' Pitcairn Alpines in Perthshire, Scotland, had been producing many rare bulbs during the previous four decades and, when it closed in 2022, he bought as many of its gems as he could afford: trilliums and erythroniums, as well miniature bulbs.

'I began to realise,' says Mr Carver, 'that I should try to fill the gap left by these nurseries and, by the time Christine Skelmersdale said that she was closing, I was ready to take the plunge.' Lady Skelmersdale had been a familiar face at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show since the early 1970s and her nursery, Broadleigh Gardens in Somerset, had a reputation for producing high-quality bulbs, often of species unavailable elsewhere.

Among the riches in her stock beds was a collection of miniature daffodils bred by the most important of daffodil breeders, Alec Grey. With the generous spirit typical of plant collectors, Lady Skelmersdale has placed responsibility for the collection into the safe hands of Mr Carver, ensuring that the plants will be available to future generations. The Grey cultivars have joined Mr Carver's personal collection of species daffodils, and of his own hybrids, at Buckland Cottage Gardens, growing in polytunnels and raised beds that form part of a disused wholesale plant centre owned by his parents.

It is easy to understand the appeal of these miniature daffodils. Usually about 6in tall with dainty flowers an inch or so wide, they have a charm that their more muscular relatives do not. Often scented and sometimes with several flowers on a stem, they present a variety of flower shapes, some with swept-back petals, others with petals that spread out or reflex around the cup of the flower. All grow well in pots, where they can be enjoyed indoors or close to the house. The hooped-petticoat forms, *Narcissus bulbocodium*, and the →

Above: **Mr Carver pollinating narcissus. Working with species and cultivars—including the Alec Grey collection he inherited from Christine Skelmersdale of Broadleigh Gardens in Somerset—his focus is on miniature and intermediate flowering daffodils.** *Facing page:* ***Narcissus*** **'Papa Snoz', which was registered in 2003 by Keira Bulbs, Australia**



Facing page: **A cross of *Narcissus alpestris* with *N.* 'Nadder Moon'.** *Above left:* ***N. bulbocodicum* 'Giselle', registered in England in 2014 by Anne Wright at Dryad Nursery, North Yorkshire.** *Above right:* ***N. scaberulus*, native to Portugal's Mondego Valley, enjoys gravelly soil**

N. cyclamineus hybrids, will spread well in places with damp springs and are even tough enough to colonise grassy areas. Most other forms prefer a free-draining soil.

Last year, Mr Carver meticulously crossed his favourite daffodils to produce hundreds of seedlings, but he will have to wait three to five years to see if any of the resulting flowers are worthy of being promoted. He believes that there are myriad possibilities for creating new miniature daffodils with double flowers, split coronas and in uncommon colours.

Although Mr Carver's breeding programme extends beyond the miniature daffodils—to cyclamen and crocus, daphnes, species pelargoniums, gladioli and a collection of *Hyacinthella*, a genus rarely available in nurseries, recently accredited by Plant Heritage—it is the miniature daffodil that stands at the heart of his work. His ambitious intent is impressive and admirable: to produce new daffodil hybrids, to promote the species and to safeguard old collections and neglected varieties.

Mr Carver is enthusiastic about the future and he looks forward to a time when collecting miniature daffodils undergoes a 'snowdrop effect', when gardeners become as obsessed with daffodils as galanthophiles are with snowdrops, energetically seeking out the latest hybrids and cultivars. He aims to see the stars of his breeding programme being mass produced and available in every nursery and garden centre. His optimism and enthusiasm are compelling and it is clear that in his hands, and those of his intrepid and enterprising colleagues, the future of the specialist nursery may well, after all, be secure.

www.bucklandcottagegarden.co.uk

Other new nurseries

Hooton's Walled Nursery, South Yorkshire
Father and son Glenn and Dean Charlton are restoring a former kitchen garden in Rotherham and producing ornamental grasses and unusual perennials.
01709 963735;
www.hootonswallednursery.co.uk

Wildegoose Nursery, Shropshire
Jack and Laura Willgoss originally set up their nursery to grow hardy perennial violas, but quickly expanded their range to include grasses and hardy perennials.
01584 841890;
www.wildegoosenursery.co.uk

Bright Green Fox, East Sussex
The closure of Marchants Hardy Plants, where she worked as the propagator, prompted nurserywoman Hannah Fox to establish a 'micro-nursery', selling her plants at plant fairs and open gardens.
Instagram @brightgreenfox

Surreal Succulents, Cornwall
After selling succulents on eBay as a hobby, Daniel Michael took the plunge to establish a nursery focusing on the plants in the grounds of Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens, Penzance ('*Through the garden gates', page 62*).
07476 349545;
www.surrealsucculents.co.uk

Botanico, Suffolk
Initially focusing on exotic plants, Will Purdom has now expanded the range he grows to encompass both very rare and common-or-garden species. All sales are made online.
www.thebotanico.com

Alan Titchmarsh

Listening in

'WE want to make a sensory garden.' I've lost count of the times I have been asked to advise on such a request. I try to be patient, to smile and present what I hope is an accommodating expression. The thing is that *every* garden is a sensory garden; it simply requires awareness in terms of observation, tactility and well-developed olfactory, nasal and aural sensibilities in order to be appreciated to the full. Who would not want a garden that looked beautiful and offered fragrance, flavours and floral variety in terms of touch, taste and smell? These things are all present in a well-tempered garden, but how often do we overlook the joy of sound, apart from birdsong?

In tune: a wren's high-pitched notes contribute to winter's *a cappella* chorus of birdsong

True enough, the avian population is the prime source of our aural pleasure: the twittering of sparrows in our huge bay tree always makes me smile. They foregather in late afternoon to regale each other with the events of their day, or so I imagine. Why else would they chatter for so long, unless they had enjoyed an eventful few hours foraging hither and yon?

I love the elaborate high-pitched complexity of the wren's vocalising deep within the box and the yew, the fussy blethering of the bluetit and the eventide coloratura of the blackbird perched upon our chimney. When the air is still at the end of a summer's day, no pleasure can compare with sitting on a garden bench, glass in hand, listening to that elaborate *a cappella*. Does he make up a new song every evening? Who is it for? Is it territorial or simply a way of expressing joy? Who knows for sure?

Edward Thomas summed up that often unexpected feeling of oneness with Nature in *Adelstrop*, about the station where the steam train drew up 'unwontedly'. 'Someone cleared his throat' and, as the train sighed and steamed alongside the platform, Thomas was entranced:

> And for that minute a blackbird sang
> Close by, and round him, mistier,
> Farther and farther, all the birds
> Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

> 'There are waterfall tuners in Japan whose sole aim is to create a pleasing sound'

That poem, written in 1915 and reflecting on a day he experienced in June 1914, is a reminder of the power not only of one of our greatest poets, but also of the rich and varied sounds of the countryside—and the garden.

A gently trickling stream is relaxing, provided the flow is gentle and not a raging torrent, although even swift-moving water, tumbling and splashing over boulders, is wonderfully effective at masking the sound of traffic. (I am told there are waterfall tuners in Japan whose sole aim is to encourage a watercourse to create a pleasing sound and eliminate any suggestion of a horse relieving itself. Nice to know…)

The sound of the breeze rustling the leaves of trees assures us that not all winds are gales that need to be named with irritating regularity. Words such as 'susurration' and 'psithurism' (the 'p' is silent), from the Greek *psithuras*—whispering—remind us that a gentle zephyr can be a friendly companion on an otherwise sultry day.

Rosamunde Pilcher, who wrote *The Shell Seekers*, is fond of wind 'soughing in the branches of the trees'. It's not a word you hear much nowadays, soughing, but that gentle moaning of branches at the mercy of a strong breeze is likely to awaken in us more unease than the gentle susurration of bamboo foliage when caught by a sudden gust.

Listen out for the thrush cracking open a snail shell using a paving stone or boulder as an anvil and rest assured that there will be one less mollusc foraging among your hostas tonight.

True enough, not all garden sounds are pleasing: the roaring leaf blower, the rasping chainsaw, the clattering hedge trimmer, the whining strimmer or the deafening engine of the rotary mower can send you into an apoplectic rage as they rend the air. Then there is the creaking gate: handy at letting you know that someone is on their way up the garden path, but still profoundly irritating. Do locate that oil can…

None of these sounds is as likely to soothe as the swish of a sharp scythe through the long summer grass. Neither will the hiss of a pressure washer ever give you as much pleasure as the rhythmic sound of a broom clearing the terrace of fallen leaves. It is the gentle and the comforting sounds in the garden that please us the most. Do not underestimate their ability to settle the nerves and calm the soul.

Horticultural aide-mémoire

Reshape a hedge

Every hedge grows a little beyond its intended bounds each year, however rigorous the annual pruning. When things have gone too far, take action. Deal with one side of the hedge this year and leave the other until next. Spend time deciding the desired line—it is sometimes apparent from the internal evidence of earlier pruning—and cut away with secateurs and loppers. Stop and stand back from time to time to check that all is well. Beware of wire and other junk that sometimes lurks unsuspected in such hedges. Clean out the base, mulch and retire for deserved refreshment. **SCD**

***Chatsworth: The gardens and the people who made them* by Alan Titchmarsh (Ebury, £35) is out now**

Next week Acanthus

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Through the garden gates

Which gardens are COUNTRY LIFE contributors most looking forward to visiting this year?

Kendra Wilson Benton End, Suffolk

Benton irises, bred by the artist Sir Cedric Morris in the mid 20th century, have been the height of chic for the past decade and, from this summer, they will be given context with the restoration of Morris's garden at Benton End in Suffolk. When the 16th-century house was being run as an art school, the informal garden was filled with the many plants (as well as irises) that Morris collected from his travels, and bred with an artist's eye. Miraculously, in 2021, the Garden Museum was given Benton End as a donation. Morris's floral paintings have offered the most clues about what grew there and this is what I'm excited about—seeing a contemporary invocation of a place that was ahead of its time. Plus, the appointment of artist-gardener Sarah Price as designer and Great Dixter-trained James Horner as plant detective indicates that the taste levels will be through the roof.
Benton End, Suffolk; for details of the opening, visit www.gardenmuseum.org.uk

> 'I shall jot down everything that takes my eye. I suspect it will be a long list'

Clive Nichols Cambo Gardens, Fife

The garden I would love to visit is Cambo in Scotland. In January and March, I want to explore the 70 acres of woodland, which should be carpeted in snowdrops—the garden is home to the Plant Heritage National Collection of snowdrops, comprising more than 200 varieties, begun in the 1930s by Lady Magdalen Erskine and expanded by Catherine, Lady Erskine from the late 1980s. I would also like to visit the 2½-acre walled garden, probably around July, as it has a Piet Oudolf-type prairie garden (unique, apparently, in Scotland) that should be looking at its best around that time.
Cambo Gardens, Fife (01333 451040; www.cambogardens.org.uk)

Alan Titchmarsh Exbury Gardens, Hampshire

After 50 years, I have moved from the chalky Hampshire Downs to a garden on acid sand, which means I can now grow rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias. A visit to Exbury Gardens, therefore, is a must. With notebook in hand, I shall tour the landscape beside →

Time to absorb: to take tea after exploring a well-tended garden, such as Yews Farm, Somerset, is one of life's chief pleasures

the Beaulieu river and jot down everything that takes my eye. I suspect it will be a long list.

I have an acre of woodland with some ancient rhododendrons already established, but I want to add to them and rejuvenate the collection—everything from the large-leafed species, such as *Rhododendron sinogrande*, to the lower-growing evergreen azaleas. Exbury has a great reputation for spring spectacle and this year, for me, it will be more meaningful than ever.

Exbury Gardens, Hampshire (023–8089 1203; www.exbury.co.uk)

Charles Quest-Ritson Bodnant Gardens, Conwy

I like returning to gardens that have improved since my last visit. I have been to Bodnant only once—in 1971. So few were my fellow visitors that I walked down the famous laburnum avenue all alone. Then I returned to the carpark to find that someone had pranged my Mini Cooper and I couldn't open the driver's door. This time, I shall plunge deeply into the woods and wallow in vast embothriums and ancient rhododendrons, before visiting Crûg Farm nursery for a little retail therapy. I only hope that parking skills have improved over the past 55 years.

Bodnant, Conwy (www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

> 'I want to return in spring to see leaves at their greenest and flowers at their frothiest'

Mary Keen Yews Farm, Somerset

I loved Yews Farm on a hasty visit three summers ago. Bowled over by the sense of being in a magical place, I felt as if I was stepping into the pages of *Tom's Midnight Garden* or *The Children of Green Knowe*. Louise Dowding has created a bewitching scene in a quarter of an acre, by shaping topiary into mounds and swirls and allowing easy perennials to flourish between bushes of box and yew. I hardly looked at the plants then, so I want to return in spring to see leaves at their greenest and flowers at their frothiest

Yews Farm, Somerset (Instagram @dowding louise)

Tilly Ware Columbine Hall, Suffolk

It was the historic iris grower Lucy Skellorn who first told me about the Plant Heritage collection of Revd Engleheart daffodils

Marianne Majerus; Andrea Jones/courtesy Cambo Gardens

Left: **The delights of Cambo Gardens in Fife stretch beyond its famous snowdrops.**
Above: **For walled-garden inspiration, Gravetye Manor in West Sussex is worth a trip**

at Columbine Hall in west Suffolk and I've wanted to see them ever since. Visiting in late April, I'd like to pick the brains of head gardener Kate Elliott about her colour-themed kitchen garden and see what seedlings are sprouting in her greenhouse. The fact that this was the home of Leslie Geddes Brown, a much-admired writer and COUNTRY LIFE contributor on plants, cooking, books, design and all matters of taste, is another pull. And, finally, I cannot resist a moat.
Columbine Hall, Suffolk (01449 612219; www.columbinehall.co.uk)

Mark Diacono Gravetye Manor, West Sussex

There is a special magic about a walled garden and, from all accounts, the kitchen garden at Gravetye is a fine example. I heard about this south-facing 1½ acres, formed in a perfect ellipse and enclosed by a 12ft sandstone wall, a dozen or more years ago. Numerous friends told me of the glorious produce serving the apparently excellent restaurant and of the further 35 acres of Gravetye gardens to visit. Why haven't I been yet? I can only put it down to the curious self-denial that occasionally seems to visit the male of the species. In 2026, I shall do better.
Gravetye Manor, West Sussex (01342 810567; www.gravetyemanor.co.uk)

Steven Desmond Newby Hall, North Yorkshire

I have known the garden at Newby Hall, near Ripon, for half a century. It was always lovely, but is now exceptionally so. The heroic double herbaceous borders, which extend from the house to the river, the woodland garden that positively glitters with choice blooms in spring, the marvellous collection of mature specimen trees and shrubs, the sunken garden, always ingeniously planted, floral delights around every corner, good bones, an orchard with seats, a visitable house full of special things, sheep safely grazing in a boundless rural setting of quiet beauty… who could ask for anything more?
Newby Hall, North Yorkshire (01423 322583; www.newbyhall.com)

Isabel Bannerman Myddleton House, Greater London

In 2026, I mean to get at last to Myddleton House—the creation of legendary botanist, botanic artist and early president of the RHS Augustus Bowles—at tulip time. I long to see the superb collection of tulips, bearded irises and *Wisteria floribunda* 'Macrobotrys' he planted and which flower still. Each May, →

The groundbreaking genius of Beth Chatto still floods her eponymous gardens in Essex, with its woodland and bog gardens

he would hold a Tulip Tea Party to celebrate his birthday. Bowles was known as the Crocus King and his alpine meadow is still swamped with rare bulbs, but in summer it becomes a blue haze of wild geranium. Being partially blind, he relished the scent of jasmine drifting into the drawing room from the filigree iron conservatory. This, together with the garden, has been restored to glory with National Lottery funds. Entry to these eight Elysian acres is entirely free of charge.
Myddleton House, Greater London (0300 003 0610; www.visitleevalley.org.uk

James Alexander-Sinclair Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens, Cornwall

For years, I have spent time in Cornwall and, inevitably, the lure of clotted cream and beaches will stale and alternative entertainment is required. We usually seek out Tremenheere Sculpture garden just outside Penzance with a wonderful view of St Michael's Mount to see what is new. It is a hillside that has been developed over the past 30 years by local GP Neil Armstrong. Almost singlehandedly, he has planted an astonishing range of plants gathered from all over the world and which thrive in the soft climate of the South-West. Among these are scattered a collection of internationally important sculptures, including a James Turrell *Skyspace*—a very calm building designed for watching the clouds—and work by Richard Long, David Nash and Kishio Suga. Art and gardens: nothing better to take your mind off bodyboarding bruises.
Tremenheere, Cornwall (01736 448089; www.tremenheere.co.uk)

> 'No visit is complete without indulging oneself in the superb nursery'

Marianne Majerus Beth Chatto Gardens, Essex

I always look forward to visiting Beth Chatto Gardens in Elmstead Market. The gravel, woodland and bog gardens are interesting in every season, but I particularly like them in spring. Beth Chatto created the garden over several decades and her ecological approach to gardening—thinking carefully about habitat and putting the right plant in the right place—was groundbreaking and inspired many of today's best designers and plantspeople. No visit is complete without indulging oneself in the superb nursery and taking a little bit of the garden home.
Beth Chatto Gardens, Essex (01206 822007; www.bethchatto.co.uk)

John Hoyland The Old Rectory, Cottered, Hertfordshire

Of all the gardens we visit, some stay with us more than others. About 18 years ago, I was enchanted by the garden created by plantswoman and artist Debbie Taussig. It remains fresh in my memory and I am keen to see how it has developed and matured. Over five acres, the garden encompasses several ponds, including a vernal pool ringed with spring flowers, enclosed herbaceous borders, perennial meadows, formal hornbeams and a grove of Yoshino cherries. The various elements of the space meld and flow into each, creating an informal and relaxed atmosphere. The garden is Mr and Mrs Taussig's private haven, but they were persuaded last year to open it for the National Gardens Scheme. I couldn't go, but will ensure that this year, when the garden opens in April, I will be there to enjoy it.
The Old Rectory, Cottered, Hertfordshire (www.ngs.org.uk)

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Repton Priory, Derbyshire
Within the curtilage of Repton School

A medieval Augustinian priory links together the history of a great public school with the Anglo-Saxon era and the Kings of Mercia, as **David Robinson** explains

Photographs by Paul Highnam

Fig 1: **The west range of Repton Priory—later the ‘Scoole howse’—seen across the medieval cloister. It is an astonishing survival**

ANNOUNCED from afar by the soaring 15th-century spire that crowns the parish church of St Wystan, the south Derbyshire village of Repton stands on a bluff above an old course of the River Trent. For many, Repton commands attention for the celebrated crypt that sits beneath the chancel of St Wystan’s, widely acknowledged as one of the great jewels of Anglo-Saxon architecture. There again, for many generations of Old Reptonians, the village will always be inextricably linked to their school and to the wonderful ensemble of historic buildings at its heart.

Importantly, these two village landmarks enjoy a common thread of connection: a vanished medieval priory of Augustinian canons, which is the subject of this article. Introduced during the third quarter of the 12th century, the canons—priests living under a rule believed in the Middle Ages to have been written by St Augustine (d. 430)—were effectively the successors to Repton’s late Anglo-Saxon religious community. In turn, after the suppression of the monasteries in the mid 16th century, the site of their priory was to become that of Repton School.

There is clear historical evidence for a major early religious house (described as a *monasterium*) at Repton, ruled during the late 7th century by Abbess Ælfthryth. It was evidently a double house, a joint community

Fig 2: **The 9th-century crypt beneath the chancel of St Wystan's parish church. The spiral columns seemingly evoke those over the tomb of St Peter in Rome, Italy**

of women and men, under the patronage of the royal house of Mercia. St Guthlac, himself of royal blood, learnt the precepts of monastic discipline here in about 697–99. Moreover, it became an important burial place for kings and princes from different branches of the Mercian royal family.

Late in that sequence of burials, in about 840, the body of King Wiglaf was laid to rest in a square mausoleum (perhaps an earlier baptistry) at the east end of the monastic—now the parish—church. Wiglaf's grandson, Wigstan (or Wystan), refused the Mercian crown in favour of a life of religion, only to be brutally murdered by a distant kinsman in 849. He, too, was subsequently interred at Repton, albeit in a rather different structure from that which had been familiar to his grandfather.

Although scholars continue to debate the detail, there is much to endorse the argument that the old baptistery-cum-mausoleum was extensively remodelled soon after Wigstan's death, specifically to provide an appropriate architectural setting for his growing cult as a saint. This, it might be said, remains precisely the ambiance encountered within the crypt at St Wystan's as it survives today—Sir John Betjeman's 'holy air encased in stone'.

Having descended into the crypt via one of two tunnelled staircases, Anglo-Saxon pilgrims were doubtless invited to circle Wigstan's relics. Framed by four distinctly twisted columns and surmounted by the central bay of a stone vault, the saint's tomb effectively stood within a baldachin. The specific inspiration for this arrangement was almost certainly the early-4th-century canopy—with twisted columns—raised by the Emperor Constantine over the tomb of St Peter in Rome (***Fig 2***).

> 'Repton became an important burial place for kings of the Mercian royal family'

Within a quarter of a century of Wigstan's death, however, the established rhythms of monastic life at Repton were brutally interrupted. During the winter of 873–74, the Viking Great Army settled on the south bank of the old Trent, with the monastery church seemingly incorporated into the camp defences. King Burgred of Mercia was driven into exile, leaving the monastic community entirely without patronage or support. →

Fig 3: **Pears School of the 1880s sits over the priory nave. The ruins of the lost choir are visible to its right, where the land falls away. Beyond is the spire of St Wystan's**

Despite all of this, Repton's much-battered church survived and the cult of Wigstan was gradually restored (indeed, one view is that the remodelling of the crypt might have occured in this period). Veneration of the relics continued through into the early 11th century, when—with the backing of King Cnut (d. 1035)—they were translated to Evesham Abbey in Worcestershire. At the time of the Domesday survey, in 1086, the church at Repton was served by only two priests, yet it may well have been a minster, or mother church, exercising pastoral care over a substantial area. Writing in the 1120s, William of Malmesbury was to observe that the glory of the once 'famous monastery' had been 'dimmed by neglect and age'.

As it happens, however, a few years earlier, in about 1115–20, Richard, 2nd Earl of Chester, had founded an Augustinian priory at Calke, only some five miles from Repton. The Augustinian canons were comparative newcomers to England, but their popularity among powerful magnates and churchmen associated with the Court of Henry I (1100–35) was growing rapidly. Indeed, Calke might well have emerged as an important house had there not been a dramatic twist in the fortunes of its fledgling community.

Soon after 1153, Calke was granted the church of Repton by Countess Matilda (d. 1189), widow of Ranulf, 4th Earl of Chester. She stipulated that the canons were to move to Repton at the earliest opportunity, further instructing that Calke was to become a cell of her new priory. In part, at least, Matilda was surely seeking to restore the devotional and political significance of the ancient site. Meanwhile, across the country at large, the Augustinian canons had already served as agents of reform at a considerable number of other former Anglo-Saxon minsters.

There is evidence to suggest that the full transfer of canons from Calke to Repton was achieved by 1172. Construction of the new priory, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, was doubtless already well in hand. Located to the immediate east of the chancel and crypt of St Wystan's, its layout was essentially of conventional monastic form, although the cloister was laid out to the north of the priory church. Almost the entire medieval arrangement is remarkably well preserved within the topography of Repton School, beginning, indeed, with its familiar entrance arch, a remnant of the priory's 13th-century gatehouse ***(Fig 4)***.

> 'A fragment of St Wigstan's skull and arm had been returned to Repton in the 13th century'

The church, alas, appears to have been destroyed soon after the suppression of the priory in 1538. At that time, Repton was initially acquired from the Crown by a Cromwell favourite, Thomas Thacker (d. 1548). His son, Gilbert (d. 1563), fearful of Queen Mary's support for the revival of monasticism, is said to have 'plucked down in one day… a most beautiful church'. Certainly, almost all trace had been lost long before the late 19th century, when its site was excavated in advance of the construction of a large memorial hall, known as Pears School ***(Fig 3)***.

The archaeologist who supervised the excavations of the 1880s, William St John Hope, thought the work may have uncovered traces of a late 12th-century church. Far more convincing, however, are his records —and surviving fragments—of an aisled 13th-century nave, its six bays defined by pairs of clustered piers of two principal forms. There was a substantial crossing, with a tower above, and to the east lay the canons' choir ***(Fig 7)*** and the presbytery.

Fortunately, the footings of the pulpitum and of the aisle piers, which together framed

Fig 4: **The school arch is a remnant of the priory's 13th-century gatehouse. The west range and headmaster's house are visible beyond**

the choir, remain exposed. Here, certain details within the pier bases suggest a date of about 1300 and it is interesting to speculate on the possible involvement of a master mason, Nicholas of Derneford. Some years later, when Derneford was employed by Edward I in North Wales, he cited Repton as a site where he had previously held responsibility.

Following the suppression of the priory, an extensive inventory was made of all its buildings and their contents in 1540. In the church, apart from the presbytery with the high altar, there was a Lady Chapel, together with further chapels dedicated to St John, St Nicholas and St Thomas. The inventory also refers to a possible shrine dedicated to St Guthlac, whose bell pilgrims 'were wont to place on their heads for the cure of headache'. Somewhere in the church, too, the canons presumably watched over a shrine containing relics of St Wigstan. A fragment of the saint's skull and a piece of an arm bone had been returned to Repton from Evesham in the early 13th century. They were laid, we are told, 'not in the mausoleum of his ancestor, as before, but in a place where they could be more worthily and honourably cared for'.

The cloister was cleared and restored to its original medieval level at the beginning of the 1920s, as part of a programme of improvements to the school. The cross standing at the centre of the garth, dedicated on Armistice →

Fig 5: **The late-12th-century undercroft of the priory's west range, now the staff common room. It is lined with architectural fragments**

Day in 1922, serves as a memorial to the Reptonians who fell in the First World War. Although nothing survives of the surrounding medieval arcades, stone fragments recovered in excavations suggest that they were rebuilt in the late 14th or early 15th century. The 1540 inventory also notes the sale of the 'Chanons seats', or carrels.

Among the surviving sections of the range of buildings that framed the east side of the cloister, there is evidence for the doorway into the chapter house. On the floor above, we know that, by the time of the suppression, the canons' dormitory had been divided into individual cells. Their refectory, meanwhile, was located in the range on the north side of the cloister, again at first-floor level.

By great good fortune, the west range of claustral buildings remains almost intact, complete with evidence for its late-medieval roof of about 1400. Under the terms of the will of Sir John Port (d. 1557) of Etwall—the founder of Repton School—this was the building purchased by his executors in 1559 to serve as the original 'Scoole howse' ***(Fig 1)***. The ground floor, or undercroft, is a remarkable space ***(Fig 5)***, with a central row of columns supporting a massive longitudinal timber, scientifically dated to about 1168–80. The south wall features a spectacular collection of architectural stonework uncovered during the archaeological work of the 1880s. For much of the Middle Ages, the rooms

above would undoubtedly have served as the prior's lodging. Indeed, in the 1540 inventory, among the rooms that appear to have been listed here by the King's commissioners were the prior's chamber, the garden chamber, the hall chamber and the high chamber.

One wonders, then, about another late-medieval addition to the priory buildings, namely the handsome 15th-century brick tower situated on the north side of the site (***Fig 6***), overlooking the old course of the River Trent. In form and detail, it resembles buildings shown in Netherlandish paintings

Fig 6: **The 15th-century 'Prior Overton's Tower'. The elaborate detailing of the red brickwork suggests that it was constructed by craftsmen from the Low Countries**

of the period and was probably built by skilled immigrant craftsmen from the Low Countries, or the Baltic. The tower—which was clearly intended as part of a larger building—retains two original chambers, one featuring a panelled ceiling ornamented with the device of Prior John Overton (in office 1437–38). On stylistic grounds, however, it is likely that it was erected by his successor, Prior John Wylne (occurs 1439–67). But what of its purpose? All that can be said with confidence is that 'Prior Overton's Tower' was deemed worthy of incorporation into the house built by the Thacker family following the suppression of the priory.

Happily, under the stewardship of the present headmaster, Mark Semmence, supported by his librarian and archivist Paul Stevens, there is a keen appreciation of the legacy of Repton's history and what it can do to enrich the life and future development of this celebrated school.

Visit www.repton.org.uk

Acknowledgements: Nick Hill and Christopher Wilson

Fig 7: **The excavated footings and pier bases of the canons' choir of about 1300**

For I'll be a wild drover

Driving cattle on foot across Scotland, echoing the practices of our forefathers and gaining intimate insight into the animals' habits, **Patrick Laurie** discovers that sometimes it really is about the journey as much as the destination

FARMING life is pretty rough on the wild Atlantic fringe. For ancient Celtic people, it made perfect sense to move around during the course of the year, following the flush of summer grass into the hills, then retreating to milder, coastal grazing for the winter. This seasonal process of transhumance used to be common throughout western Europe, but, faced with modern pressures, most of these systems have fallen apart over the past 100 years. In terms of modern agriculture, many of the old traditions around cattle management and summer grazing are so far lost in the mists of time that they almost feel like a dream nowadays.

Visiting Co Clare in 2023 with fellow farmer Richard Lockett, we weren't prepared for the level of interest and enthusiasm around cattle cultures on the west coast of Ireland. As part of the annual Burren Winterage Weekend, we joined 500 people as they walked a dozen cows onto the hill, mimicking the ancient traditions that bound together humans and cattle for centuries.

Reflecting on the spectacle as we headed back to Scotland, it was clear that something special is happening on the Burren. Yet we were also aware that many equivalent cultural experiences have almost entirely vanished from the UK over the past century,

A Highland Drove at Strathfillan, Perthshire **by Louis Bosworth Hurt may eliminate the inevitable rain and cold, but it embodies the peace and slow pace of a cattle drive**

particularly those movements that began in ancient transhumance, but later evolved into the much bigger practice of droving. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, tens of thousands of cattle were being walked down from the Highlands each year, in massive droves that ran for miles across the hills. It was an extraordinarily significant part of Scottish culture for generations, yet it has absolutely vanished today. Returning from Ireland with our heads full of ideas, Richard and I began to work on a plan.

It transpired that Richard sends several of his Luing heifers from his farm in Dingwall in Ross-shire to Kintail in Highland, more than 50 miles away on the opposite side of the country, each year. They graze and fatten for the summer on croftland managed by Graeme Macrae, then they're brought back east for the winter. The process is a nice imitation of old transhumance, the principal difference being that when these cows move, they make the journey in an aluminium trailer. Surely it wouldn't be so hard to make the trip on foot and hoof again? We began to dream of re-creating at least part of that journey.

In the event, Richard was able to secure permission from the two main landowners between Morvich and Glen Affric, parts of which are fast becoming famous as a rich and beautiful forest. The proposed route climbed across mountains, over bogs and around the lips of foamy black lochans. It felt daunting and, if we had thought about it too much, we might never have started. With a sense of excitement and trepidation, Richard, Graeme and I set off to gather the heifers at Morvich on the morning of September 9 last year.

> 'The drove was an intimate insight into the complex, gentle and ever-shifting lives of cattle'

Cows move at a beautiful pace. It's never too fast, nor is it ponderously slow. Sometimes, it can feel as if you're hardly making any progress at all; your mind falls to wondering about a million unrelated details. You watch for the cows and notice that, as each front hoof is lifted from the ground, the rear hoof slips neatly into the mark left behind. You walk between the beasts and wonder why they're suddenly fixated on pulling from one specific tuft of heather, when there are dozens of identical examples within easy reach on either side. When you finally look up and remember that you're on a drove, you've walked for several miles without noticing.

Certain cows shifted in and out of focus as we walked. One heifer started to cycle and the excitement caused by her bulling enthusiasm seemed to electrify the others. A different heifer baulked at every obstacle and often lagged behind the group because she refused to take shortcuts—but we soon learned that she could be ignored as, now and then, she would fall out of love with her own company and charge forward to keep up. It was a fascinatingly intimate insight into the complex, gentle and ever-shifting lives →

Get on, lass: Graeme Macrae switches an aluminium trailer for a stout pair of boots to move Luing heifers from their summer Highland home to Dingwall in Ross-shire

of cattle, particularly when the animals would gather around our tents to wake us up in the morning or jostle to see what we were cooking on the camp stove after a long day on the trail.

As well as being an adventure, the timing of this project made sense in the context of national conversations about the future of land management in wild and remote corners of the UK. When these ideas are explored in the media, nuance is often lacking. Arguments tend to be based around a binary choice between sheep and trees, but it's obvious that cows were part of the picture long before sheep arrived in the Highlands. As we walked across the mountains towards Glen Affric, we passed the crumbled remains of old shielings where cattle were grazed during the summer months and walked through tens of thousands of acres of grass that is only nibbled now and then by passing deer. These landscapes used to be grazed and worked by cattle, and there's plenty of evidence to suggest that biodiversity and wildlife boomed as a consequence. The truth is that these far-flung Highland landscapes often feel lost and lonely, but that's partly because they're missing the impact of cows.

> 'Cows were part of the picture long before sheep arrived in the Highlands'

As a staunch advocate for the role of cattle in conservation, Richard is adamant that cows deserve to play a major role in the future of the uplands (*'No job too big', July 16, 2025*). 'The potential ecological benefits [of cattle] are many and wide ranging,' he explains. 'Many habitats in Scotland evolved in the presence of large herbivores and native cattle can fulfil that role. You only need to watch a beast in the hills to see the impact she has. Wandering around, non-selectively grazing, lightly stirring up the ground and producing dung—all these things are important when it comes to creating and maintaining diverse ecosystems.'

Pushing against the easy conclusions that so often characterise land-management debates, Richard also has some words of caution about the role of cows: 'Nothing is simple in conservation and the use of cattle always needs to be carefully thought through. Essentially, it's a case of getting the right animals in roughly the right place at roughly the right time of year. It would be easy for cows to damage sensitive habitats—projects that depend upon cattle require a great deal of planning and care.'

Bridgeman Images; Alamy; Mary Evans Picture Library

Droving school: a herd of Luing cattle creates a more salubrious Scottish traffic jam than the usual ribbon of caravans, biodiversity booming in their hoofprints

Part of the landscape: in the 19th century, droving was a steady part of the farming year

As our little drove came to an end, those heifers were gathered into makeshift pens at the head of Glen Affric. In terms of scale, duration and scope, we had hardly skimmed the surface of this ancient tradition, but even this small engagement felt valuable. Everybody involved in the drove was already familiar with cows and beef production, but all were agreed that we'd seen a new angle to the animals as we moved through the massive landscapes of Kintail. The old ways are long defunct and it would be mad to argue that droving could again be a sensible part of beef production in the UK, yet there is obvious value in remembering the importance of ancient cattle cultures, particularly as we recognise the importance of these animals for the future.

Benmore Lodge, at the head of Loch Ba, is a jewel at the heart of the 32,000-acre Benmore estate on the beautiful Isle of Mull

A Mull masterpiece

Benmore Lodge—a historic royal retreat adorned with magnificent murals painted by a princess—is now refurbished and available for luxury breaks

The delights of Mull are on the doorstep

IF there's one thing better than a room with a view, it's a room with a view and a colourful backstory. These elements come together to perfection at the newly refurbished Benmore Lodge, at the head of Loch Ba, a stupendously pretty spot within the 32,000-acre Benmore estate on the Isle of Mull.

The lodge was a wedding present from the 8th Duke of Argyll to his son, the Marquess of Lorne, and daughter-in-law, Princess Louise, Queen Victoria's fourth daughter, on the occasion of their marriage in 1871. The Argylls had owned the estate since the mid 17th century. Princess Louise was a remarkable royal: beautiful, sparky, unaffected; a keen cyclist, smoker and cook; a passionate supporter of women's education and suffrage; but, above all else, art was her great love. She had the strength of character to persuade her mother to allow her to undertake formal training at what is now the Royal College of Art. Her friends included Rossetti, Millais and Whistler. Wishing to be taken seriously, she insisted on being paid for her work.

The elegant dining room is made for entertaining, comfortably seating 10 people

Benmore Lodge wasn't originally intended to be a place for overnight stays, but more of a daytime bothy where Louise could entertain as her husband and his companions fished on the loch. Incapable of mere idling, however, she set about adorning the walls with murals, which have been preserved to this day.

> 'The estate's private chef is on hand to take care of catering if required'

The Benmore estate has been the property of the Radford family since 2004 and Benmore Lodge, which wasn't part of the original sale, since 2018. The family has re-established Benmore's reputation as one of the finest sporting estates in Scotland, not only offering traditional outdoor pursuits, such as stalking and salmon and trout fishing, but also hiking, e-biking and island-hopping adventures aboard a fleet of boats.

In 2024, Benmore Lodge was repurposed ingeniously as a light-filled, four-bedroom, exclusive-use showstopper (with a fifth bedroom suitable for a cook or nanny). Interior designer Jessica Buckley has balanced Victorian and contemporary features in a manner that feels at once historically respectful and entirely up to date—grand without haughtiness, brimming with colour, warmth and energy.

In addition to multiple living spaces, there's a large, splendidly equipped family kitchen, as well as a suitably ducal dining room that comfortably seats 10. The estate's private chef is on hand to take care of catering if required. The lodge also houses a museum-quality collection, painstakingly assembled and curated by the present owners, of 150 works by some of the most distinguished Scottish landscape artists of the past two centuries.

The glories of Mull are on your doorstep—its lochs and glens, rivers and forests, its 300-mile coastline of sweeping bays, white-sand beaches and sheer sea cliffs. At the still centre of it all is Benmore Lodge, chock-full of masterpieces on the inside, surrounded by masterpieces on the outside.

The lodge has four luxurious bedrooms

Grand: Jessica Buckley's interior design

Benmore Estate
ISLE OF MULL - SCOTLAND

Benmore Lodge is available from £1,500 a night with a minimum stay of three nights. For more information, please visit www.benmoreestate.co.uk or email indi@benmoreestate.co.uk to build your own bespoke luxury break at Benmore Lodge

Mark Cocker

One owl to rule them all

Whether for its textbook appearance, regional ubiquity or haunting and mellifluous call, it's no wonder the inimitable tawny may be Britain's best-loved owl

THE wonderful tawny probably supplies our default image of all British owls. It is our most abundant and widespread species, with only the mountainous Scottish Highlands and the largely treeless Hebrides beyond the bird's limits. Yet we must also acknowledge tawny owls are in decline; their redesignation as an amber-listed species due to a 10% contraction in range. Britain has become a rather impoverished place for this family of owls; one factor might be the overlooked matter of light pollution. Another concern for several species is secondary poisoning from rodenticides.

With a current British total of 50,000 pairs, the tawny is still the one owl that many of us are likely to have seen—perhaps as a silhouette perched momentarily on a rooftop or a broad-winged, brown shape floating silently through the trees. Tawny owls come readily into towns and villages and will breed in many suburban woodland patches, leaving them to hunt across domestic gardens after dark.

As well as being our largest owl, it is also probably the most versatile in matters of diet. Rodents are a staple, but so, too, are songbirds snatched as they sleep. A large starling roost in Lancashire last century contained a million birds and supplied a life of relative leisure for the local tawny population. Yet they can tackle a range of other prey, including young hares, rabbits, squirrels, weasels, as well as more eclectic fare—fish, frogs, newts, even woodpeckers.

Titbits as large as adult rats are swallowed whole. A main source of information on the birds' diet are the pellets of undigested fur, feathers and bones that owls regurgitate daily at roost sites. Each species of owl produces a pellet that is instantly recognisable—black, smooth and almost shiny in the case of the barn owl, but broad and grey coloured for tawny owls.

Pellets are a good indicator that an owl pair is resident in an area, but clearest of all is the tawny owl's extraordinary vocalisation. The male produces the inimitable sound from late autumn onwards and it can be heard in midwinter. It has given rise to a mnemonic that, at one time, every child would have committed to memory: *tuwhit-tuwhoo*. However, this transliteration is a conflation of two sounds made separately by male and female birds and its precise structure warrants a little teasing out.

All tawny owls have a sharp disyllabic warning or contact call—*keewick* (or, if you prefer, *tuwhit*)—that they deliver at regular intervals, as they move in tandem through their territories. The male also then produces a separate song. This is itself in two parts: the first is a clear, low, drawn-out hooting *hoo-ooo*; then followed by a silence of several seconds, after which he delivers a more sustained, rising and tremulous *oo-ooo-o-o-o*. The complication arises partly because the pause left by the male is often punctuated by a call from his mate.

> 'The male's call is beautiful, solemn and utterly mysterious'

It is fitting that one of the most celebrated avian sounds was first diagnosed on the page by the Bard. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare wrote: 'Then nightly sings the staring owl: Tu-whoo;/Tu-whit, Tu-who—A merry note.' In these two lines, we have perfectly evoked the two-part male song, intersected by his mate's sharper call. The only part with which I dare disagree is the idea that it is in any way 'merry'. It is certainly beautiful and unforgettable, but it is also solemn and, if the background conditions are just so—perhaps a touch of ice and moonlight and stars pricking the blackness overhead—utterly mysterious.

The novelist H. E. Bates once suggested that a nightingale's song consisted of exquisite phrases wrapped around silences and it was the shape and eloquence of the latter that made this nocturnal performance so affecting. In precisely the same way, it is the pause in the male tawny's notes—and his apparent recognition that an absence of sound is as moving as song itself—that turns a duet by these owls on a dark winter's night into one of the greatest musical performances in all of British Nature.

Familiar face: tawny owls breed in suburban woodland and hunt over gardens after dark

Shutterstock

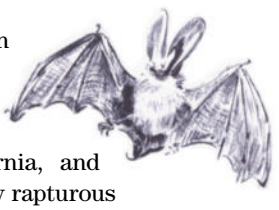
Where the Wildings are

Renowned for illustrating the 'Famous Five' series, the mercurial, motorcar-obsessed Eileen Soper lived a bucolic and eccentric life, discovers **Ian Morton**

INDIGNATION flared in 1921, when two 7in by 5in etchings included in the Royal Academy (RA) Summer Exhibition turned out to be the work of a 15-year-old girl. The umbrage was dismissed. 'We judge the work, not the persons,' declared jury member Claude Shepperson. 'We do not know the painter's name, and it does not matter if the artist is three or 300. Looking at the work from an artistic standpoint we had no hesitation in accepting it. It is no fault of ours that Miss Soper, aged 15, can hold her own with the giants of old age. We are proud of the girl.'

Facing page: **All the peace and beauty of rural England: a scene of ploughing by Eileen Soper.** *Top:* **The artist at the wheel of her beloved A. C. 'ACE' in 1925.** *Right:* **Instantly familiar: the Famous Five**

In time, the art of Eileen Alice Soper would find a place in millions of homes, for she would illustrate the covers of all 21 of Enid Blyton's 'Famous Five' adventures, published from 1942 to 1963; her wholesome and outgoing youngsters reflecting the period style and taking a firm place in the nation's illustration heritage. However, long before the Blyton contract, Soper's sketches of younger children had charmed people both here and in the US. Exhibitions in Los Angeles, California, and Chicago, Illinois, drew rapturous praise, with one critic declaring her a genius and her portrayal of 'dream children' a miracle and another describing her as 'a schoolgirl among the masters'. English art critic Haldane Macfall praised her 'purity of artistic intention thoroughly attuned to the years of innocence' and 'wholly devoid of the mechanical stuff of the art schools', a relevant comment as her natural talent had developed under the tuition of her father, George, a brilliant portrayer of working horses.



Growing appreciation brought a flood of requests, but Soper was 'far too →

Mary Evans Picture Library; On loan from The Soper Collection at the Pannett Art Gallery; Alamy; Look and Learn/Bridgeman Images; Courtesy of Chris Beetles Ltd, who holds the copyright and exclusively represents The Estate of George and Eileen Soper

Facing page: **An illustration for *Caravan Holiday* by Elizabeth Gould.** *Above:* **A founder member of the Society of Wildlife Artists, Soper was acclaimed for works such as *Muntjac Doe and Fawn*.** *Below:* **Always a favourite: the artist spent hours observing badgers at night**

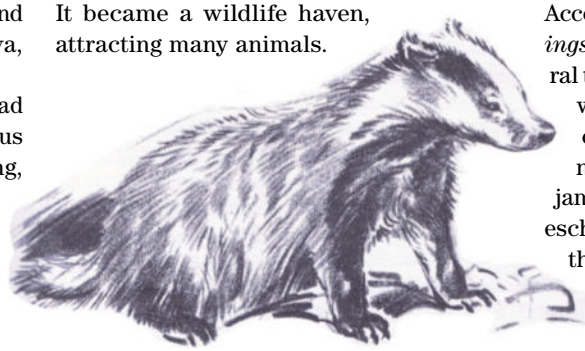
busy' and even turned down a commission to illustrate *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. The year 1924 saw a particular accolade, when Queen Mary visited the RA spring exhibition and asked for an immediate print of her *Flying Swings* etching.

Success was proving material. Aged 22, Soper bought a Vauxhall tourer. She not only enjoyed driving (she kept a clean licence for 65 years), but added mechanical skill to her virtues, servicing cars herself. She toured extensively with her father, the pair sketching and painting the natural world. Motoring revealed a foible, however, for she considered herself frail, had an obsessive fear of hospitals, and would make a detour to avoid passing one. She also thought that cancer could be contracted by breathing and did not welcome general human contact. She is not thought to have formed any romantic attachment and remained a spinster—as did her sister Eva, a potter, with whom she lived.

Soper never went abroad, ate no meat, had pet dogs, hated cats, had no formal religious adherence and abhorred alcohol, swearing, smut and 'freak' modern art. She wrote to well-known figures requesting autographs—and obtained Hilaire Belloc's. She had also long written verse and, although her efforts failed to impress those whose advice she sought, including playwright and novelist John Galsworthy, she forever scribbled lines on bits of paper that lay to hand.

> 'She never went abroad, hated cats and abhorred smut and "freak" modern art'

The Soper family lived in a house at Harmer Green near Welwyn (then a village) in Hertfordshire that was designed by George and set in a semi-wild garden. Eileen and Eva spent their lives there and, after their father's death in 1942, they christened it Wildings. It became a wildlife haven, attracting many animals.



Mice ran free through the house; birds flew in to perch on heads and shoulders and be hand fed. Eileen skilfully sketched every species that appeared. She developed a special passion for badgers, spending cold, dark hours draped in foliage with a red-filter torch to observe them. Cubs took food from her hand and escorted her home across the field. 'Here, in company with those merry wanderers, I had met the fabulous spirit of midsummer night,' she wrote. Among other books, the richly illustrated *When Badgers Wake* established her as a naturalist author.

Soper died in 1990, the same year as her sister, aged 84. Executors found Wildings in damp disrepair and the garden vastly overgrown. Rooms were piled with boxes and bags of hoarded papers, and mice nested everywhere, but a trove of artwork lay within. According to Duff Hart-Davis, author of *Wildings: The Secret Garden of Eileen Soper*, several thousand works by father and daughter were rescued, with an estimated value of £900,000 (£2.6 million today) and are now sought after. In one room, some 3,000 jam jars were stored, but not for jam. She had eschewed their disposal as rubbish, fearing they would be smashed on a council tip and cut the paws of her beloved badgers.

The good stuff

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Collapsible umbrella with chestnut handle and monogram print, £360 (www.swaine.london)

↑ **Joseph**
Talba aviator sunglasses in blue, £175 (www.joseph-fashion.com)

Dive in

The best way to cure the January blues is to embrace them, suggests **Amie Elizabeth White**

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↓ **If Only If**
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↑ **Julia Lloyd George**
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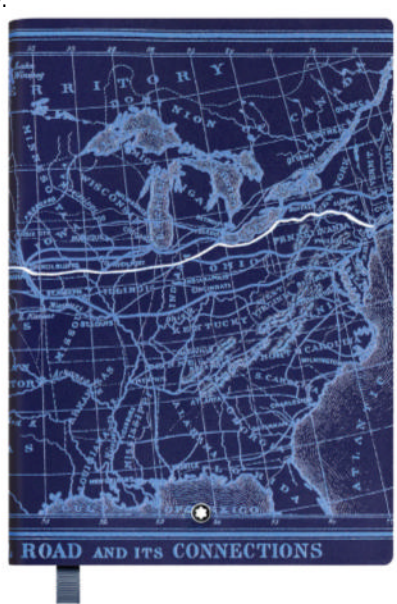
↑ **Kate Collins**
Starlit ring in blue topaz, £3,860 (www.katecollinsjewelry.com)

→ **Le Creuset**
Salt mill in azure, £43 (www.lecreuset.co.uk)

Aspiga
Rona lambswool rib knit hat, £36 (www.aspiga.com)



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Rooted in Nature

From ice cream to underwear and explosives, plants are remarkably integral to much of the manmade world, as a new book reveals. **Harry Pearson** investigates

IN Ancient China, rice was not only eaten, but also mixed with sand, water and limestone. 'The stickiness of rice holds the Great Wall together,' writes Jonathan Drori, whose latest book, *The Stuff That Stuff Is Made Of*, shines the spotlight on 30 different plants that have had a profound, and often surprising, impact on human existence.

A board member of both the Oxford and Cambridge Botanic Gardens, Prof Drori's own interest in plants began in childhood. 'I grew up in Kew,' he explains. 'My father had trained as a botanist before becoming an engineer and my mother was fascinated by plants, too—especially by the things she could make from them.

'Our regular visits to Kew Gardens were enlivened by my parents' stories about the plants; we'd eat bits of them as we walked around. On one occasion, my father even allowed me to lick the top of an opium poppy. It had no effect, although I doubt social services would have been impressed!'

A career in science and technology eventually led Prof Drori back to his beloved Kew and botany. He now works to educate people about plants and their extraordinary applications. As the example of the Chinese rice-mortar shows, it's not only as food that they have had a profound effect on human life. 'The gutta-percha tree, which grows in the rainforests of South-East Asia, is a good example of how we use plants in unexpected ways,' he points out. 'The British first spotted its potential in Singapore in the 1840s, when a visiting East India Company surgeon, William Montgomerie, noticed the locals wore waterproof shoes made from latex extracted from the tree trunk.'

Initially, the impact was largely felt on footwear, furniture and household goods, but, a decade later, Werner von Siemens, a German inventor living in London, realised that gutta-percha could be used to insulate the wires that sent electrical telegraph signals. 'Siemens's invention meant that telegraph, and later telephone, cables could be laid under the sea,' explains Prof Drori: the gutta-percha tree is the foundation of our modern global telecommunications network. Eventually, synthetic materials would supersede it as underwater insulation, but dentists still find a use for it today. If you have ever had the misfortune to have

root-canal surgery, the chances are you'll have some gutta-percha latex in your mouth.

Another unlikely source of life's vital ingredients lies beneath the waves. 'In Britain, we probably wouldn't think of ourselves as great users of seaweed,' Prof Drori observes. 'In fact, the alginates extracted from giant kelp and other brown seaweeds are part of our everyday lives. They are used in ice cream to prevent crystals forming, giving it a smoother texture; and in sauces, syrups and chocolate milk to make them thicker. Alginates make bread and cakes fluffier, cream cheese creamier and the head on your pint of beer foamier.' That's not all: 'We use alginates in products that must hold water and where the ingredients must not separate—you'll find them in your toothpaste, in lipstick and moisturisers. The ingredient that makes paint non-drip? That comes from seaweed, too.'

Then there's the humble cotton plant. 'When people think of cotton, they will inevitably think of its use as clothing,' says Prof Drori, 'but few of us would consider that until recently most of our "paper" money gained its strength and durability from cotton. In fact, US banknotes, and most Euro notes, are made from a mix of cotton and linen and contain no traditional paper (first made from mulberry bark by the Chinese thousands of years ago) at all.' As an aside, Prof Drori notes that when cotton was first brought to Europe by Arab traders in about the 8th century, its origins were a mystery. 'One English travel writer claimed that cotton was harvested from a tree that grew tiny lambs on the tips of its branches. The branches apparently bent under the weight, allowing the little lambs to nibble grass when they were hungry…'

> 'My father allowed me to lick the top of an opium poppy. I doubt social services would have been impressed'

As human technology has advanced, so have the uses found for plants. Bamboo, which grows so fast you can sometimes actually hear it popping and snapping if you stand close enough, has been harnessed for thousands of years to make everything →

Plants under fire

Although the French make jelly from dandelion flowers—and you can happily add the leaves to a salad—the idea that the plant might be useful for much beyond ruining a nice lawn comes as a surprise to most. Yet the dandelion played a part in winning the Second World War.

Dandelion roots exude latex, and the latex of the Russian dandelion contains large quantities of rubber. When normal rubber supplies from the Far East ran short towards the end of the conflict, the Americans and Russians planted hundreds of square miles of dandelion fields, harvested the latex and used the rubber for tyres and engine parts.

Fermented kelp, meanwhile, produces acetone, a vital ingredient in high explosives. 'It was used extensively during the First World War by munitions factories,' Prof Drori clarifies. 'Incidentally, horse chestnuts were also collected for the same purpose.'

Dandelions, kelp and conkers, then: the secret weapons that won the war.

from scaffolding to flutes, via chopsticks and fishing rods—but it was the experiments of a 19th-century French chemist, Hilaire de Chardonnet, who created 'bamboo silk' from the cellulose fibres of the giant grass, that paved the way for our modern bamboo textiles industry. What was once used to prop up runner beans and roses is now worn as underwear.

The bark of the cork oak tree also has a surprising multiplicity of uses. These days, cork is invariably best known as a stopper for wine bottles, as a cushioning material in the insoles of shoes and as bathroom flooring. In the past, however, it was used in life jackets, as sound insulation in submarines and as protection against the cold in polar exploration ships such as Roald Amundsen's *Fram*. Today, however, it's travelling far further than distant Antarctica.

> 'It turns out that coconut charcoal is the best substance on Earth for nullifying astronauts breaking wind'

'What is amazing,' Prof Drori enthuses, 'is that this incredibly traditional material, which mankind has been working with for about 5,000 years, is being used by NASA on its most advanced spacecraft. It is deployed as cladding on launch rockets such as the Atlas V and the new Space Launch System, as well as in the heat shields of the Space Shuttle.' A material that was first used for fishing floats in southern Iberia in about 3000BC has helped propel robotic missions to Jupiter and Mars. 'Despite all of our experimentation and advanced technologies,' he says, 'there is still nothing to top cork as a lightweight insulator against extreme heat.'

Although he has written extensively on plants and trees for many years, even Prof Drori was surprised by some of the things he uncovered during his research for his book. 'The coconut tree is one of the most productive of all plants: you can drink the milk, eat the pulp, make sugar from the flowers, doormats and brushes from the husks, and waterproof thatched roofs from the leaves. What I didn't know, however, was that the air filters on the International Space Station contain granules of charcoal made from coconut shells.' These granules are, it seems, the most effective way of dealing with the odours that inevitably accumulate in an air-tight module containing seven human beings. 'It turns out that coconut charcoal is the best substance on Earth for nullifying astronauts breaking wind,' he laughs.

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Russell Pullan reflects on his father's LifeBook

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Life Book memoirs

The colourful kitchen

Cookers, lighting and accessories in cheerful shades, selected by **Amelia Thorpe**

← True blue
This bespoke kiitchen by Artichoke (www.artichoke.co.uk) features a range by Lacanche (www.lacanche.co.uk) that was a gift to the owner and has been completely restored

↑ Custom colour
Pick almost any hue you like with Aga's bespoke colour service, whether you want to colour-match to your kitchen cabinetry, a favourite paint shade or a fabric sample. Prices from £17,735 for the eR7 100 model in Mustard shown here, with bespoke colours costing an additional £2,150 (0800 111 6477; www.agaliving.com)

↓ Set piece
Add fresh colour to the table with the Bistrot Solid four-piece cutlery set in Garden Green, which costs £37 from Sabre Paris (020–3793 3033; www.sabre-paris.co.uk)

↑ Green solution
Designed to run on bioethanol fuel, a clean-burning and sustainable energy source, the Hamlet Solution 5 bioethanol stove in Peapod Green costs £794 from Direct Stoves (0161–516 9601; www.directstoves.com) →

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Interiors

Hidden secret
This walk-in pantry by Guild Anderson (www.guildanderson.co.uk) is painted in Pollen II by Paint & Paper Library (www.paintandpaperlibrary.com)

Height fantastic
The Lucia double pendant on a rod, medium in Arancio, £1,506, has a customisable drop and is designed to add eye-catching colour above a kitchen island or table, from Hector Finch (020–7731 8886; www.hectorfinch.com)

Pretty in pink
La Cornue's CornuFé 110 range cooker is available in bespoke colours, including this delicious pink, shown with an induction top and polished-chrome trim, prices from £9,039 (01832 275415; www.lacornue.com)

Top of the range
The handsome OG Professional 188 range cooker in Arancia di Sicilia with Satin Nickel trim, from £47,428, is designed to take centre stage, complete with customisable cooktop and oven options, from Officine Gullo (020–7036 1632; www.officinegullo.com)

Warm touch
British manufacturer Everhot introduces a new colour, Clay, across its range of electric heat storage range cookers and stoves, shown here on an Everhot 100 cooker, from £11,425 (01453 890018; www.everhot.co.uk)

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Interiors

→ Joy pop
Pooky's cheerful Stanlette shade in Yellow with Copper interior is £73, which includes a pendant kit (020–7351 3003; www.pooky.com)

↓ Cupboard love
The interior of this larder by Plain English (www.plainenglishdesign.co.uk) is painted in Boiled Egg from the company's own range of paints

↑ Everyday hero
The Elise 110 dual-fuel range cooker in Mineral Green, £4,399, is a kitchen workhorse, featuring two ovens, grill, storage drawer and gas hob with multi-ring wok burner, from Rangemaster (01952 643149; www.rangemaster.co.uk)

↑ Colour choice
Charnwood stoves are available in a range of eight colours, including Bronze, shown here on the twin-door Island 1 multifuel stove, £2,484 (01983 537777; www.charnwood.com)

→ Blue hue
The Serendipity 5WS woodburning stove is available in Atlantic Blue, £1,784, a deep, rich shade designed to accentuate the clean-lined simplicity of the design, from Chesneys (020–7627 1410; www.chesneys.co.uk)

← Winter warmer
Filled with Sichuan peppercorns, the Peugeot Bali Fonte cast-iron pepper mill in Orange, £40 from Borough Kitchen, will surely spice up the kitchen table (020–7043 1478; www.boroughkitchen.com)

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Historic Constable schoolhouse for sale

A PROPERTY on Barn Street in Lavenham, Suffolk, that was once used by the grammar school John Constable attended has come to the market. Originally a wool merchant's house, it was the site of Lavenham Grammar School between 1647 and 1887. According to the National Trust, the artist was sent to the school as a boarder at the age of 11, but, having received 'unwarranted beatings', he was dispatched, as a day boy, to the Royal Grammar School in nearby Dedham, where the teachers encouraged his interest in calligraphy and drawing. The daily walk between home in East Bergholt and the school is thought to have instilled a deep knowledge of and love for the Suffolk countryside.

Grade I-listed, The Old Grammar School (*above*) dates to 1530 and was among the last of the great merchant houses to be built before the collapse of Lavenham's wool and cloth industry. According to selling agent David Burr, it was rescued from near dereliction in the mid 1990s before being sympathetically renovated into a four-bedroom house, retaining many original features. Arranged across three floors, there are two good-sized reception rooms and a kitchen with an Aga on the ground floor. It is on the market for £1.1 million (01787 883144).

Asquith's New Forest retreat revisited

IN the spring of 1912, as Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was facing a large-scale, coordinated window-smashing campaign by the Suffragette movement and the beginning of the hunger strikes in response to their imprisonment, he went in search of somewhere to retreat for the holidays. The answer came in the form of an Arts-and-Crafts house near the Hampshire town of Lymington that was owned by a cousin. Describing it as 'a nice little villa in the New Forest', Asquith returned to Hurstly (*above*) frequently over the following summers and is thought to have met there with Venetia Stanley, a close friend of his daughter, Violet, who became the great love of his life. Robert Harris's latest novel, *Precipice*, references the house and the affair. Launched on the market for £2 million with John D. Wood, Hurstly has five bedrooms and stands in two acres. There is a two-bedroom cottage in the garden. 'Sandy Down, within the parish of Boldre, is one of the most desirable addresses in the New Forest,' says the agent (01590 540139).

My first house in the country Griff Rhys Jones

Where was your first house in the country?
South of Ipswich, Suffolk, on an estuary. From boyhood, I always dreamed of owning a bargeman's cottage when sailing the east coast on holiday

A quick description
A five-bedroom farmhouse built in about 1600, which we bought in 1984

How did you find it?
The owner didn't want to pay estate agents, so he advertised using a small ad. There was a housing recession; prices were still cheap

What made you buy it?
Hollyhocks. Reasonable remoteness. A sleepy sunny day. A dream of total escape

Favourite aspect of the house?
The house isn't big, but it has an ordered simplicity: parlour; simple dining room; Victorian extension for a small kitchen; and a flat front with wonky windows

Best memory of living there?
We still own the house. I was the first of my friends to have a house in the country and everyone came for festivals and parties

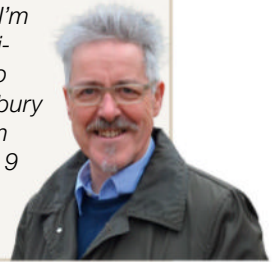
Biggest mistake?
Accepting the word of a surveyor that the former owner had made the property 'good'. Off we went on a voyage of restoration and conservation lasting 30 years

Anything particularly unusual about the house?
The parish boundary runs right through the middle. You can wake in one parish and clean your teeth in another

Biggest indulgence?
We bought the fields back and front to create big gardens

What happened to it?
We bought the rest of the property and moved next door and now the house is rented as a holiday let in eight acres of gardens by an estuary, except at Christmas and Easter when we fill it with friends again

Griff Rhys Jones is president of The Victorian Society Its lecture series 'Heroes and Heroines of the Arts-and-Crafts Movement' begins on January 28 (www.victoriansociety.org.uk). He is starring in 'I'm Sorry, Prime Minister' at the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, W1, from January 30–May 9 (www.theapollotheatre.co.uk)



What's hot…

Plucky Plymouth
The historic Devon port city was the UK's fastest-growing property hotspot in 2025. Analysis of mortgage lending by Lloyds Banking Group revealed that house prices rose by 12.6%

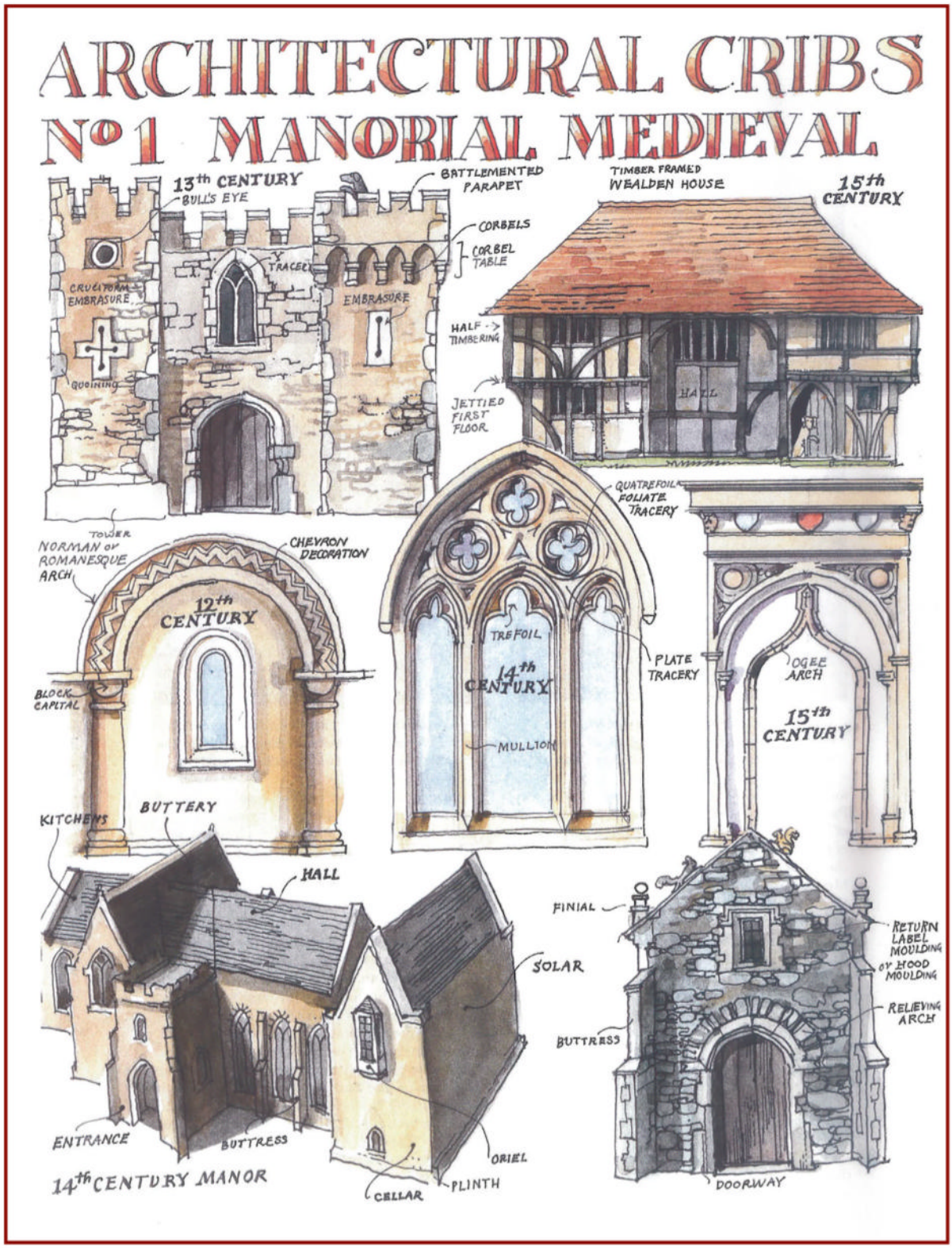
Grandparents to the rescue
An increase of 60% in house prices and 70% in nursery fees against sluggish wage growth over the past decade has given rise to a new migratory trend: grandparents moving closer to help out with child-care. These families are being dubbed 'Rogers' (reliant on grandparents and equity release) by Jackson-Stops

…and what's not

Capital floods
With many of London's Victorian-era drains at capacity, one in eight homes located in the capital is in a zone with a high or medium risk of surface water flooding, according to data published by Emoov. This is twice the rate of the national total

Burglary hotspots
Edgbaston and Solihull in the West Midlands, followed by Hampton and Barnes in south-west London, are the top four locations for house burglaries, says MoneySuperMarket. The team analysed home insurance customers to find the UK postcodes with the highest rates of burglary claims since 2020

Compiled by Arabella Youens; Illustration by Matthew Rice



The five-bedroom house in Streatham, London SW16, that boasts a galleried room where Sir Henry Tate first displayed his famous art collection is now on the market with a guide price of £1.5–£2 million (Wilfords)

← Rumer Godden, the author of *The Greengage Summer*, built a ground-floor wing to accommodate her writing room at Pollards, a Georgian house in the Buckinghamshire village of Whiteleaf. It is now on the market with Michael Graham for £1.7 million

Julie Harding

Where winter blooms

Sensational gardens don't go to ground over the winter months and the new owners of any one of these charming properties will buy into a home where the external landscape may even take top billing

←↑ Somerset, £1.475 million

Rendy Farm, thought to date from the 1600s, enjoys an enviable setting in the midst of a glorious garden (total acreage 3¼) that never fails to impress. In fact, the garden is a towering feature of this particular home, in the village of Oake near Taunton, due to its expansive lawns, kitchen garden, raised flowerbeds, mature and ornamental trees, an apple, pear and plum orchard, a pond and stream and, to give it a touch of 'Monet', two arched bridges that are lined with willows. In a far corner sits a shepherd's hut, which not only enjoys an idyllic location, but is the perfect bolthole for visiting family members or friends. Inside, Rendy Farm has an abundance of period features, including flagstone floors and exposed structural timbers, five bedrooms and myriad characterful rooms and spaces on the ground floor. *Jackson-Stops (01823 325144)*

→ Pembrokeshire, £1 million

John Nash played a part in the creation of Colby Lodge in Stepaside, the renowned architect's designs used to craft some of the features of the house that was built by coal magnate John Colby in the early 1800s, with Nash's clerk of works sent to supervise. Inside, there are five bedrooms and four reception rooms over three floors, with the grandeur evident here extending into the great outdoors where there are four—yes, four—gardens. Within these, the likes of rhododendron, azalea, camellia, ancient oak, metasequoia and rare linden/lime trees grow. For green-fingered buyers, there is also an elegant greenhouse to propagate seeds and nurture the next generation of plants. With the gardening done, the new buyers can not only savour their handiwork, but also the nearby trees, for Colby Lodge is shaded, sheltered and almost surrounded by the 900-acre Colby Woodland Garden estate, which is owned and managed by the National Trust. As if this wasn't enough in terms of natural treasures, a short stroll leads to the beach at Amroth. *Country Living Group (01437 616101)*

→ West Sussex, £1,75 million

The Grade II-listed Eastergate House embodies Georgian elegance and timeless charm. ‘If romance was a property, this would be it,’ says agent Goreti Gananca on the beguiling video that features this equally captivating five-bedroom house in which, continues Ms Gananca, wisteria-clad walls contain history, sunlit rooms are charming and the sweeping gardens as delightful as the sunsets over the nearby spire of St George’s Church in Eastergate village. The aforementioned mature gardens are eye-catching whatever the season. Landscaped, and with quiet seating areas incorporated, they wrap around the property in a caress, the plants and flowers providing year-round colour. Additional features include a rose garden, a summer house and a greenhouse. Anyone could be happy here, whether indoors or enjoying time alfresco. *Fine & Country (01243 908077)*

← Herefordshire, £1.25 million

At the end of a no-through lane close to the village of Evesbatch and within the Frome Valley sits the five-bedroom The Old Rectory, a Georgian farmhouse with four reception rooms and a contemporary extension. Beyond the characterful stone house, the south-facing lawned gardens are made for gazing at the fine views of the county, taking tea on summer afternoons—indeed, doors from the farmhouse kitchen lead onto a terrace that forms the perfect spot for lingering lunches and relaxed evening gatherings, too—or a place for the dogs to play. They will also love to spend time in the pretty tree garden. In all, The Old Rectory comes with a little under two acres of land, plus period outbuildings, garaging, stores and stables. *Morgan Aps (01905 384848)*

→ Dumfries & Galloway, £995,000

‘Kings Grange is a unique country home that combines traditional charm, extensive grounds and a wealth of amenities perfect for those seeking privacy and heritage amid the serene beauty of rural Scotland,’ says agent Iona Conn of this 1863 home in Castle Douglas. Everything connected to this seven-bedroom Victorian abode feels spacious, from the house, which covers 8,990ft sq over two floors (there is also a basement), to the 11 acres beyond. The gardens are known in the local areas, as they form a part of Scotland’s Gardens Scheme, which describes Kings Grange’s gem in its blurb as: ‘An extensive garden surrounded by mature trees and shrubberies, with views to the south-west over the surrounding countryside.’ The current vendors can take the credit for this green-fingered restoration of the original Victorian garden and their planting of herbaceous mixed borders, beds and rockeries provides blasts of colour at various times of the year. The new owners will also be able to enjoy 600m of single-bank fishing rights on the River Urr. *Savills (0141–222 5875)*

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Kitchen garden cook Onions

by Melanie Johnson

Bolognese-stuffed baked onions with Parmesan mash and a rich gravy

Serves 4

For the bolognese

4 large or 8 medium white onions
1tbspn olive oil
25g butter
1 carrot, finely diced
1 celery stick, finely diced
1 garlic clove, crushed
400g minced beef (or half beef, half pork)
1tbspn tomato purée
100ml red wine
200g tinned tomatoes
1tspn dried oregano
A splash of milk
Handful of finely grated Parmesan

For the mash

800g floury potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks
50g butter
100ml milk or cream
50g Parmesan, finely grated

For the gravy

300ml beef stock
200ml red wine
1tspn tomato purée
A splash of Worcestershire sauce
1tspn soy sauce
A knob of butter

Method

1 Preheat the oven to 180˚C fan/200˚C/400˚F/gas mark 6. Slice the tops from the onions and peel them, keeping the roots intact so they hold their shape. Boil the onions whole for about 10 minutes until just tender, then drain and leave to cool slightly. Carefully scoop out the centres with a spoon, leaving two or three thick outer layers to form sturdy shells. Finely chop the scooped-out onion and set aside.

2 For the bolognese, heat the olive oil and butter in a frying pan. Add the diced carrot and celery, cooking until soft, and then add the previously cooked chopped onion and garlic. Increase the heat, add the minced beef and cook until browned. Stir in the tomato purée, then pour in the red wine and let it reduce by half. Add the tinned tomatoes and oregano. Season well, then simmer for about 20 minutes until rich and glossy. Stir through a splash of milk and a handful of Parmesan.

3 Place the onion shells snugly in a small baking dish and spoon the bolognese into each one, pressing lightly to fill. Drizzle with a little olive oil, cover loosely with foil and bake for 20 minutes. Remove the foil and bake for a further 10 minutes until the tops are golden and bubbling.

4 Make the mash by boiling the potatoes in salted water until tender, then drain well and mash with the butter, milk and Parmesan until smooth and creamy. Season to taste.

5 Add the beef stock, red wine, tomato purée, Worcestershire sauce and soy sauce to a small saucepan. Bring to a steady simmer and let it bubble for 12–15 minutes until it is reduced by half and thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Whisk in a small knob of butter and seasoning to finish.

6 To serve, spoon the Parmesan mash onto warm plates, top with a baked onion and spoon over the rich gravy. Finish with a few shavings of Parmesan and freshly chopped parsley.

Another idea with onions

Quick pink shallot pickle

Finely slice two banana shallots into rings and place them in a small bowl. Bring 100ml white-wine vinegar, 50ml water, one tablespoon of caster sugar, one teaspoon of sea salt and a few pink peppercorns to a simmer, then pour over the shallots. Leave to stand for 30 minutes until the shallots turn blush-pink and have lightly softened. Drain before serving. Especially delicious spooned over smoked salmon on bagels.

Melanie Johnson

Ode to the swede

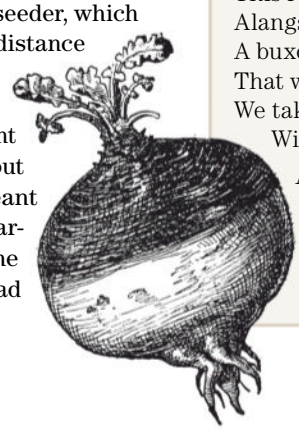
The underrated root vegetable is the real hero of the Burns Night meal, says **Douglas Chalmers**

MUCH as I love haggis and the famous Burns poem, I have often wondered why this part of the meal receives all the glory. This is an attempt to redress the balance. Today's farm folk may have cool drinks in the fridge in their air-conditioned tractor cabs to slake their thirst, but we would make do with hopping into the neep park and cutting a refreshing slice off a big swede with a pocketknife. Our children still talk fondly of 'Granny's neeps', when my mother would put the swedes on to boil perhaps a little earlier than necessary. The result was a steaming bowl of soup-like red sweetness—delicious.

> 'Three swipes with the tapner... the third blow delivered with the swede in mid air'

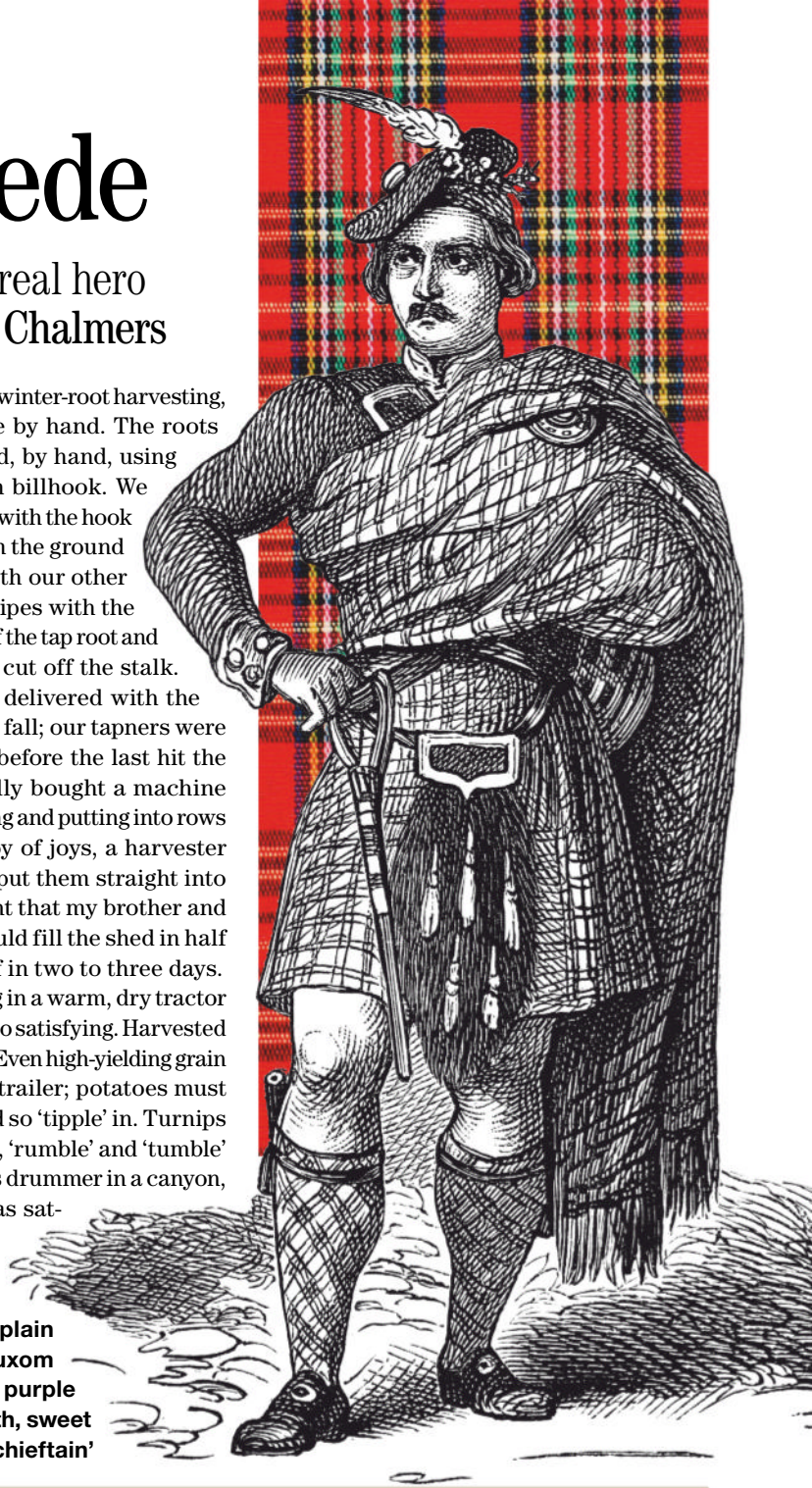
The swede, until relatively recently a significant winter fodder crop in the north-east of Scotland, was extremely labour intensive pre-1970s. As a youngster, I dreaded the 'neep barra' being put onto a tractor in the spring. This basic implement would lay out masses of seeds along the drills in the field and I knew that in a few weeks we would have to knock out 990,000 of every million plants as they were singled, 7in–8in apart, in the 'first hyow'. Every able-bodied person on the farm would arm themselves with a hoe and, taking adjacent drills, walk up and down, drill by drill, for days on end. Us younger boys soon fell behind and had to choose between working the long drills by ourselves or moving over to where the drills shortened into the corners of the field.

The 'second hyow' was to knock out weeds between the now established plants. The invention of the precision seeder, which placed one seed the exact distance apart from its neighbours, plus a pre-emergence herbicide called Ramrod, meant I could hang up my hoe, but those summer chores meant that the hard labour to harvest the crop through the winter never seemed so bad in comparison.



When I first started winter-root harvesting, everything was done by hand. The roots were 'pu'ed', or pulled, by hand, using a tapner, a long, thin billhook. We would grab the swede with the hook at the end, pull it from the ground and hold the stalk with our other hand. Then, three swipes with the tapner: two to clean off the tap root and any soil, the third to cut off the stalk. This third blow was delivered with the swede in mid-air free fall; our tapners were into the next swede before the last hit the ground. We eventually bought a machine that would do the lifting and putting into rows for us, and finally, joy of joys, a harvester that lifted them and put them straight into the trailer. This meant that my brother and I, on two tractors, could fill the shed in half a morning, instead of in two to three days.

It wasn't only sitting in a warm, dry tractor cab that made the job so satisfying. Harvested crops sound different. Even high-yielding grain only 'swishes' into a trailer; potatoes must be handled gently and so 'tipple' in. Turnips and swedes, however, 'rumble' and 'tumble' like a loud, proud bass drummer in a canyon, so you know a crop as satisfying as the sound is coming in.



Fit for a noble clan: plain it may be, but the buxom swede in its garb of purple and white is a smooth, sweet acolyte to its 'great chieftain'

The Haggis, michty dish o' state,
Proclaims its place upon oor plate.
And by its side, its prood richt hand,
Anither product o' oor land.
Chappit, creamy, sweet and reid,
Faa is like the noble Swede?

This reid neep's a crop o' note,
Alangside barley, grass and oat.
A buxom, shapely, earthy root,
That we should haud in high repute.
We tak in tons fae aff the soil,
Wi' mony months o' sweat and toil.

As seen's we've heard the Selkirk Grace,
It's time for Rabbie's fine address.
It rants and raves and fires the bleed,
Driving patriotic deed,
But moist and buttery, silky smooth,
The decent swede oor passions soothe.

Olio, fricassee, ragout,
Are aeten noo by ulkie mou'.
But a' their flavours you can keep,
If I can get some chappit neep.
An wi' haggis, tatties and a dram,
My stamach I will sit and cram.

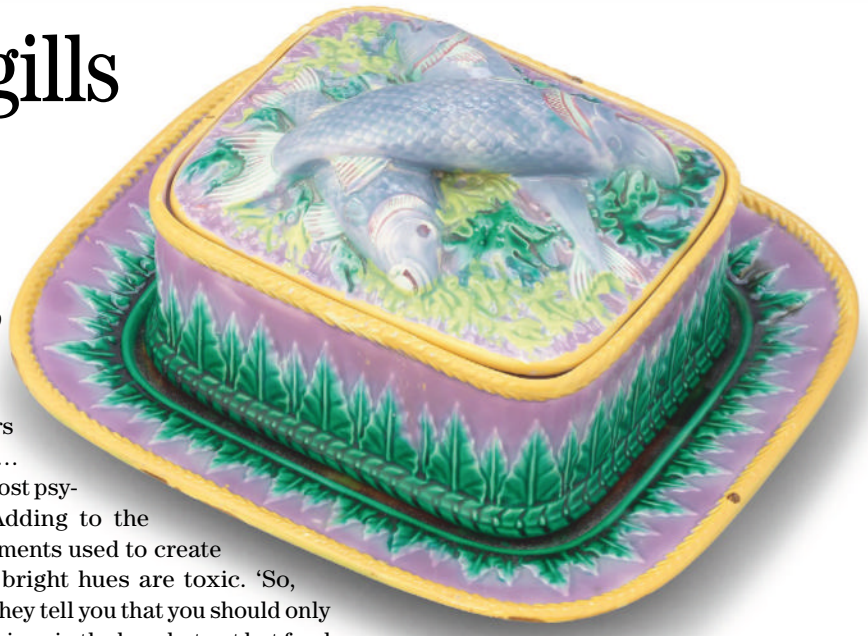
There is a place for swunky maet,
And much o' it I've even ate.
I've perused menus, oh so vain,
When I should have chosen something plain.
The kitchen's funcies I dinna need
When I can get an honest Swede.

** With apologies to Robert Burns*

Getty

Green around the gills

A sardine-festooned majolica box in a glaring clash of toxic colours enthrals Bonhams Knightsbridge managing director Matthew Haley, as he reveals to **Carla Passino**



Something fishy: a 'George Jones horror' in garish hues and topped with sardines takes pride of place with Matthew Haley

'THEY are terrific, really.' Matthew Haley, the managing director of Bonhams Knightsbridge, is gushing about sardines. Not the edible kind: he's talking about three fish resting over what looks like a bed of leaves, or perhaps grass, on the lid of a late-19th-century majolica box by George Jones & Sons. 'You have to see it to believe it, to understand how completely bonkers it is. It is an extraordinary piece of Victoriana.'

The box is an unexpected find in the collection of a man who dresses like a Savile Row mannequin and is a specialist in antique books and manuscripts. Although he has an unbridled passion for all Victorian design, particularly the heavily carved drama of Gothic Revival furniture—a trait he feels must come with the job: 'my predecessor as managing director in Knightsbridge is really into Pugin'—the 'George Jones horror' is quite a departure from his usual style. Yet, it's precisely the wacky nature of the box (and its pendant—yes, he has two) that attracts him. 'The colours are horrific in both: purple and yellow and acid green, that kind of thing—and I absolutely love it,' he laughs. 'I happen to like sardines anyway, but whoever had the idea of putting them on top of a dish and then having all of these crazy colours around them… They're almost psychedelic.' Adding to the fun, the pigments used to create those very bright hues are toxic. 'So, nowadays, they tell you that you should only serve cold things in the box, but not hot food because it will poison you.'

Not even that, however, dents Mr Haley's enthusiasm. For him, the boxes are both a link to a historical period he loves—at times he wonders: 'What did the Victorians make of them?'— and to a great collecting couple to whom they previously belonged. Peter Rose and Albert Gallichan met in the 1950s 'and spent the next 60 years collecting Victorian works of art and building an amazing home in Brighton. Apparently, among their friends they were known as Victoria and Albert. I think there is something marvellously camp about that'.

The design reminds Mr Haley of his early days at Bonhams: 'One of the first things I did was working on the [pottery manufacturer] Minton archive, which is now in the Wedgwood Museum in Stoke-on-Trent and that's when that kind of 19th-century aesthetic was introduced to me. Although the boxes are not by Minton, they are very much in that style.'

Perhaps the principal reason they are so dear to him, however, is that they were a present for his 40th birthday from his partner—who bought them even though he 'really, really doesn't like them'. Indeed, when the couple had first come across the sardine-festooned wares, 'he said "Over my dead body will these come into our house"—but they did'. Mr Haley hastens to add, with perhaps more than a touch of wishful thinking, that his partner 'has now grown to love them'. The boxes take pride of place on a library shelf, where they stand out in all their fishy, colour-clashing glory: 'We do always have to explain them to visitors because they don't really fit with anything else.' That's another plus, then: a guaranteed conversation starter for any dinner party.

Run of the mill

ALONE in London in January 1826, John Constable sent a hasty note to his friend John Fisher. Although it primarily concerned *The White Horse*, which had won a gold medal at an exhibition in France, the artist mentioned a new picture: 'All my family are at Brighton… I staid a fortnight with them, and painted there one of my best pictures, the subject, the Mill (Perne's) at Gillingham; it is so very rich and pleasing that if you are at Salisbury, and would like to see it, I will beg the proprietor, Mr. Hand, to let me send it to you.' Fisher was the vicar of Gillingham, Dorset, and it was when visiting him in 1820 that Constable first set sights on Perne's (also called Parham's) Mill. Returning in 1823, he sketched it from life repeatedly—and a good thing it was, too, because the building burned down two years later. It's from those studies that he painted a first oil in 1824 (now at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) and the picture he mentioned to Fisher, a larger version of the former, in which he embroidered the water with ducks, the field with donkeys and the horizon with a view of Mere Church (*right*). Today, it's at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, US.

Alamy; Getty

Take five: pictures inspired by Giuseppe Verdi

La TRAVIATA. Opera di Verdi 6
Vero Estratto di carne Liebig.
Violetta: Prendi, quest' è l'immagine De' miei passati giorni... Atto III°, Scena ultima.

SIGNOR VERDI died at Milan today at 2:50 a.m. His death, though expected, is regarded in Italy as national bereavement,' wrote *The Times*'s Rome correspondent on January 27, 1901, for publication the following day. The long-lived opera composer (*see January 28 issue*) had dominated the stage for more than 50 years, becoming an international celebrity. He kept artists busy and not only with poster, set and costume designs. Scenes from his most famous operas appeared on advertising trade cards and the man himself proved an inspiration for portraitists and cartoonists alike.

1 Face time: Giovanni Boldini's portraits (*below*). When Verdi invited Boldini to the premiere of his *Otello* in Milan in 1887, the painter's luggage didn't arrive: 'I was forced to rent an outfit for the evening, imagine how I was dressed,' he lamented. 'And I was in the first row!' Before that terrible moment of sartorial distress, however, Boldini had had to contend with even greater anguish. An admirer of Verdi, he had longed to paint his portrait and, eventually, in 1886, managed to persuade the reluctant maestro —but the picture didn't turn out well. The painter was especially mortified because he misinterpreted the composer's words —'with regards to Boldini's painting, it's a big mess'—as a judgement on the quality of his work, rather than the difficulty in shipping the unfinished portrait back to the studio for the finishing touches. Boldini would eventually present the completed oil to Verdi seven years later at the premiere of *Falstaff*. However, back in 1886, he had also managed to get the maestro to sit for a quick pastel picture and it was this work he was most proud of: 'I showed Verdi's portrait at an exhibition, a pastel with a hat on his head and a white scarf around his neck,' he wrote to a friend in July 1886. 'It has had great success, they offered me up to 10,000 francs! Imagine, I made it in three hours. But I don't want to sell it because I like it more than the oil I made for him.' Boldini would later show it at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1899 and the Venice Biennale, but eventually presented it to the Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna in Rome, where it remains today

2 Running joke: Melchiorre Delfico's caricatures (*above centre*). Delfico, the scion of Italian aristocrats, met Verdi through his uncle in 1857, when the composer went to Naples to stage *Simon Boccanegra*. Although Delfico was himself a composer and an opera singer, it was at caricature that he excelled—he would later contribute to the British weekly *Vanity Fair*—and Verdi provided the perfect subject. Over the decades, Delfico made some 100 caricatures: the maestro overwhelmed with proposals, fighting censors or rehearsing at the piano with his prima donna, his tenor—and his dog in tow. Verdi loved Delfico's work and nicknamed him 'the great Neapolitan Nadar', after the French photographer and caricaturist

3 Top trumps: Liebig's trade cards (*above left*). Looking for new ways to publicise its extract of meat, in 1872 Liebig hit on collectable trade cards covering everything from history and literature to sport—and opera. In 1888, a year after *Otello* had premiered at Milan's La Scala, the company issued a series covering six scenes from Verdi's work. *Aida* followed suit in 1891 and *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* early in the 20th century. In 1902, Liebig also published a series on Verdi's own life—the second ever devoted to a music composer after Johann Strauss, but well ahead of Mozart and Wagner

4 Back to the board: Adolfo Hohenstein's *Falstaff* poster (*above right*). He may have been born in Russia to German parents, but it is in Italy that Hohenstein rose to fame as a champion of both Art Nouveau and poster art. After moving to Milan, he became a stage designer and began collaborating with musical publishers Ricordi. Although more closely associated with Puccini's operas, he not only worked on the sets and costumes for *Falstaff*, but also created the poster for its Paris premiere in 1894

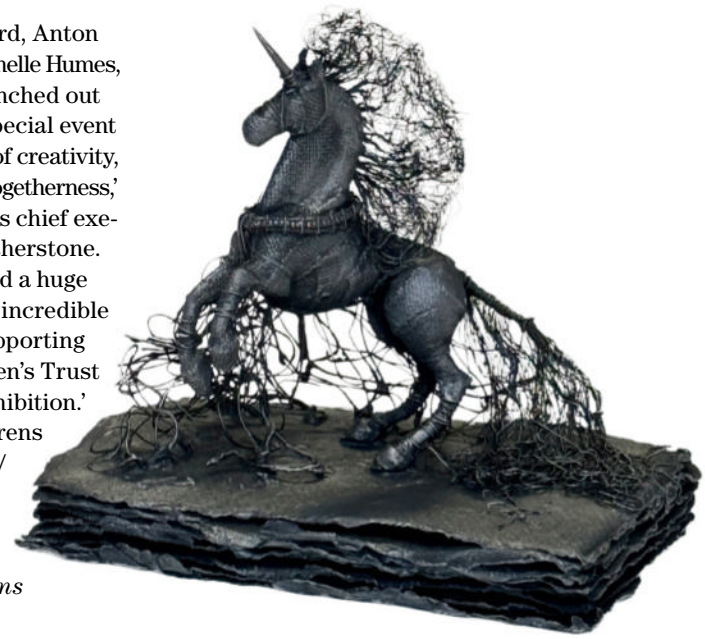
5 Going for bronze: Enrico Butti's sculpture (*below*). Verdi had requested a modest funeral 'with no singing or sound' and he had it—first time around. A second ceremony was held a month later, when his coffin was moved to Casa Verdi, the rest home for poor musicians he had founded. This time it was a state affair, with 300,000 people in attendance, mounted soldiers in high uniform, flags, flower wreaths, a six-horse-drawn hearse and 900 singers who sang *Va, Pensiero*, the *Nabucco* chorus. A little more than a decade later, on October 10, 1913, when Verdi would have turned 100, a bronze of the composer was unveiled outside the rest home. Sculptor Enrico Butti, who had stepped in after Antonio Carminati had died suddenly, shunned the heroics. Verdi is in a pose he often kept: hands behind his back, a leg slightly bent, gaze lost into the distance

United in a good cause: a work by The King's portraitist Jonathan Yeo (*above*) and a unicorn sculpture by Cathy de Monchaux (*below*)

WEIRD & WONDERFUL

IMAGINE an exhibition that brings together the intricate unicorn sculptures of Turner Prize nominee Cathy de Monchaux, a beguiling painting by The King's official portraitist Jonathan Yeo and Royal Academician Jock McFadyen's urban landscapes. These artists have all generously donated their work to the selling exhibition 'Together Through Art' at the Mall Galleries, London SW1, and online from February 10–14. In total, nearly 100 artists are contributing, from painters Sue Arrowsmith, Nicky Hoberman, Liza Giles and Gideon Rubin to sculptors Wilfrid Wood and Arabella Brooke, printmaker Stephen Walter and Matthew Rice, illustrator for Emma Bridgewater. The reason for such a stellar cast is because the exhibition is in aid of The Sick Children's Trust. This vitally important charity supports the families of children admitted to hospital, offering 'homes away from home' where they can live for free, so they can visit the hospital daily and support their sick child. The trust has many celebrity ambassadors, including Michael Crawford, Anton du Beke and Rochelle Humes, but has now branched out into art. 'This special event is a celebration of creativity, inspiration and togetherness,' says the charity's chief executive Jane Featherstone. 'I'd like to extend a huge thanks to every incredible artist who is supporting The Sick Children's Trust through this exhibition.' (www.sickchildrenstrust.org/events/together-through-art-2026).

Charlotte Mullins



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A study in sculpture

A new catalogue in four volumes explores the extraordinary riches of the sculpture in the Royal Collection. Its author, **Sir Jonathan Marsden**, selects 10 favourite works that reflect the diversity of this astonishing collection

← **In a letter dated January 17, 1816, the celebrated sculptor Antonio Canova revealed that he had agreed to make the Prince Regent, the future George IV, 'an ideal group of Venus and Mars, symbolic of Peace and War'. It was a resonant subject in the aftermath of the defeat of Napoleon and was intended to take pride of place in Carlton House, London. Carved life-size from a single block of marble, the narrow gap between the two bodies—a technical *tour de force*—charges the composition with energy. As one contemporary critic, Quatremère de Quincy, observed, Mars struggles 'between love and pride', as Venus,'eloquent with amorous supplication, has implanted in her companion the visible stirrings of irresolution, presaging his imminent disarmament'**

↑ This thinly cast bronze bust of Ferdinand Alvarez de Toledo, 3rd Duke of Alba, is by Leone Leoni. The Duke probably commissioned it in 1555 for the long gallery in his ancestral castle at Alba de Tormes near Salamanca in Spain. It was displayed there together with busts of Charles V and Philip II, the two monarchs he served. All three busts by Leoni are now in the Royal Collection and show the three men in identical armour. The Duke wears the Order of the Golden Fleece and a badge with a crucifix

↓ François Girardon's equestrian statue of Louis XIV was cast in bronze by the founder Jean le Pileur in 1696. It is one of four small bronzes made after the celebrated monumental original—which stood 26ft high and was cast in a single pour of molten metal on December 31, 1692—that stood in what is now the Place Vendôme, Paris, France. It was destroyed in 1792. The dress and pose are inspired by the figure of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitoline in Rome, Italy. George IV acquired this piece in 1817 →

→ *Facing page:* **Louis-François Roubiliac first made his name as a sculptor in 1738 with the statue of George Frideric Handel playing the lyre in the Pleasure Gardens at Vauxhall in London. This bust, made for the composer the following year, is based on a terracotta, now at the Foundling Museum. Handel was 54 and only recently recovered from a 'stroke of the palsy', which had left him partly paralysed for almost two years. Handel kept the bust until his death and it was later presented to George III, together with the composer's harpsichord and music manuscripts**

← **Queen Victoria was only 25 when she commissioned this portrait of herself from sculptor John Gibson as a pendant to Emil Wolff's statue of Prince Albert as a Greek warrior. Gibson was instructed to portray the Queen in Greek dress and completed the life-size model in May 1845. The figure wears a pearled circlet or diadem. 'My statue,' he wrote to a friend, 'has none of those usual symbols of a Queen—such as the crown, the royal robes and the ball and sceptre. I have tried to give royalty in the look and action.' The sculpture was originally painted, an attempt by Gibson to revive this Greek practice, a decision that divided critics when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1847**

↑ **In January 1542, François I commissioned Benvenuto Cellini to redesign the *porte dorée* at Fontainebleau. Cellini characterised the existing doorway as 'wide and low, [and] in their vicious French style'. He proposed to overlay it in bronze with an overdoor panel of a nymph, representing the '*fontana bella*' evoked in the name of the place, supported by two satyrs. The project was never completed, but this is a small-scale preparatory cast for one of the latter figures. Its counterpart survives at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, US, and the nymph tympanum —cast at full size—is at the Louvre, Paris** →

© Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust; AdobeStock

→ This life-size terracotta bust of a laughing child has probably been in the Royal Collection since it was first made in about 1500. It is attributed to the sculptor Guido Mazzoni, who was born in Modena, Italy. He lived in Paris between 1495 and 1516 and drew up unrealised designs for Henry VII's tomb in Westminster. The bust has been claimed as a youthful portrait of Henry VIII on the doubtful grounds of likeness and, for a period in the 19th century, it decorated the nursery in Buckingham Palace. The recent removal of later layers of overpaint has revealed the original colouring of this life-like sculpture

↑ Personifications of the four seasons—from left to right, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter—were probably executed in 1692–95 by the leading sculptor in Rome, Camillo Rusconi. The figures were originally created for the *palazzo* of the Marchese Niccolò Maria Pallavicini, but were subsequently sold to George I and were installed in the King's Gallery created in 1725–27 by William Kent at Kensington Palace in London. It's a mark of the admiration they enjoyed that the figures were widely copied

↑ This low-relief panel in marble shows Elizabeth, Duchess of York, with her daughter Princess Elizabeth of York (later Elizabeth II), by Arthur Walker. It is a timeless image of motherhood, the sculptor having removed any jewellery or context that might date the image. The demanding technique of low-relief carving is inspired by the work of the Florentine Renaissance sculptor Donatello. Walker exhibited the completed panel at the Royal Academy in 1928

↑ *Enid the Fair* is a unique marble version of a bust that George Frampton made in 1907 and exhibited in bronze at the Royal Academy in 1908. It is one of several idealised female portraits by the sculptor that are characterised by serene expressions, rich coiffure and medieval costume. In this case, his inspiration was probably the story of Enid and Geraint, one of King Arthur's knights, which was published in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–85). The square socle is also characteristic of Frampton's work

European Sculpture in the Collection of His Majesty The King by Jonathan Marsden (Modern Art Press in association with the Royal Collection Trust, £350) is available now

Huon Mallalieu

Fig 1 left: ***The Five Miracles of Christ*****, altarpiece at St John's Almshouse, Wiltshire. £5.664 million.** *Fig 2 above:* **Fabergé Imperial Winter Egg. £22.895 million**

A life cut short

The sale of a Fabergé imperial egg and a 15th-century triptych made headlines last year, but one of the most powerful pieces was a painting by Richard Parkes Bonington showing what he could have become, had he not died so young

As previously mentioned in Country Life (*Town & Country, December 10/17, 2025*), the sale of the triptych from St John's Almshouse, Sherborne, Wiltshire, at Sotheby's at the end of last year had the happiest possible outcome. The altarpiece of *The Five Miracles of Christ* **(*Fig 1*)** had been in situ almost from the day it was painted in the 1480s, although for much of that time it had been sequestered in the boardroom of the charity's Brethren, or trustees, where it was kept closed. Furthermore, four Apostles on the outer wings had been painted over in wood-grain to ensure safety from iconoclastic eyes. Only in the 19th century was its true nature rediscovered and, thereafter, it was displayed openly once more.

It came to wider notice in 1923, when shown in an exhibition of British Primitive Paintings at the Royal Academy. Sadly, it does not, in fact, add to the tiny number of pre-Reformation English paintings known to have survived, as it is now convincingly attributed to the circle of a Flemish painter known as the Master of the View of St Gudule. For present purposes, this 'circle of' follower has been upgraded with his own designation as the Master of the Sherborne Almshouse Triptych.

The buyer, a Christian charity that paid £5.664 million, has stated that it intends to lend the triptych to the town 'on a regular basis'. This is an act of patronage comparable to that of the original donor, who is quite likely to have been one of the Bishops of Salisbury, perhaps Thomas Langton, who died as Archbishop-elect of Canterbury in 1501. He had undertaken diplomatic missions for the Yorkist kings and somehow retained the favour of Henry VII. There might well be better chances of finding true 'British Primitives' on the Continent than in England. During the Reformation, Catholic ambassadors to the Tudor court exported shiploads of Church treasures.

Fig 3: ***The 4th Duke of Norfolk*** **by Hans Eworth, a rival of Holbein. £3.212 million**

The triptych sold well over estimate, but most of its 30 companions in the evening session went in line with theirs. Among them, at £3.212 million, was as fine a Tudor portrait as is likely to come on the market nowadays, the 4th Duke of Norfolk **(*Fig 3*)** on a 43in by 32in panel by Hans Eworth (1515–74). One suspects that Eworth was less adept at navigating religious politics than his great competitor Holbein; most of his clients were Catholics.

Also at Sotheby's was a splendid example of the work of Alexandre-François Desportes (1661–1743), a still life of a dog and cat disputing game and provisions **(*Fig 4*)**—which was far from 'still' in the original meaning of silent (£304,800).

Both Christie's and Sotheby's made great efforts to deck their pre-Christmas halls in London not only with some spectacular things on preview for New York or Paris sales, but some serious works to be offered here, including the Fabergé Imperial Winter Egg **(*Fig 2*)**, which made £22.895 million at Christie's. For all its ingenuity and undoubted magnificence, I was strangely underwhelmed by that bauble, designed as Tsar Nicholas's Easter present to his mother in 1913. However, after the press view, I had the rooms almost to myself for a while and one painting gave me particular pleasure.

This was *Naufrage: A Vessel in Distress in a Storm off Calais Pier* **(*Fig 6*)**, a 10¾in by 14in canvas by Richard Parkes Bonington, the genius who died in 1828 aged only 25. Turner himself could hardly have bettered it for raging waves and sheeting spray. It is not what one would expect of Bonington, but

Fig 4 far left: **Still life by Desportes. £304,800.** *Fig 5 above:* ***Long Bridge*** **by William Turner of Oxford. £2,540.** *Fig 6 left:* ***Naufrage: A Vessel in Distress*** **by Bonington. £889,000**

then it dates from his last year and is perhaps a pointer to what might have been (£889,000). It was painted for his patron, friend and pupil Baron Jean-Charles Rivet (1800–72), with whom he had travelled in Switzerland and Northern Italy in 1826. Patrick Noon, the authority on the artist, has suggested that the painting may be connected to a commission to illustrate a French edition of George William Manby's treatise on his life-saving invention the Manby Mortar.

The swirling composition may also be linked to Turner's drawing of the Eddystone Lighthouse off the Cornish coast, of which Bonington had a print. Here, the subject is the lighthouse on Fort Rouge, a wooden structure built in 1695, which had survived two British assaults, as well as many storms, and was eventually demolished in 1864. The fort was popular with British artists and Bonington knew it better than most, having been brought up in Calais.

Christie's catalogue aptly quotes Edmund Burke's essay on the Sublime to explain the power of this painting: 'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.'

In the Christie's day sale, there were a few watercolours (which no longer have dedicated sales), including several by J. M. W. Turner. At a lesser price level, £2,540, I must mention a 9in by 15in watercolour by the other Turner, William of Oxford (1789–1862). It showed the Long Bridge, Wolvercote, near Oxford (***Fig 5***), and a peaceful scene it was. However, as memorialised on the bridge today, on September 10, 1912, when that corner of Port Meadow was an Royal Flying Corps airfield, it saw one of Britain's earliest fatal air crashes.

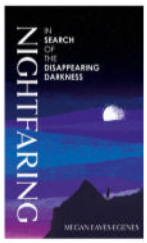
Next week **Drink with a hippo**

Pick of the week

The painting that intrigued me most at Sotheby's was a 40in by 51¼in *Still Life with a Theorbo, a Glove, a Sash, a Sword, Books and a Print of Inigo Jones*, catalogued as 'Anglo-Dutch School, third quarter of the 17th century' (£101,600). A very good case could be made for an attribution to Evert, otherwise Edweart or Edward, Collier (1642–1708), who worked between Amsterdam and London. He is best known for *trompe-l'oeil* paintings of letterboards, but also produced these allegorical biographies. The architect Inigo Jones had brought the first base-lute known as a chittarone or theorbo from Italy to enhance royal masques. Apparently, however, it nearly didn't make it. The Dover customs had suspected it to be a 'Popish engine to destroy the King'.

Rage, rage at the artificial light

Back to the dark ages: the night skies above Loughrigg Tarn in the Lake District, mercifully free of light pollution, are a salve for the soul



Nightfaring: In Search of the Disappearing Darkness
Megan Eaves-Egenes
(Simon & Schuster, £18.99)

THE author chooses 'nyctophobia' as a noun for the human fear of the dark. She could equally have picked achluophobia, lygophobia, myctophobia or scotophobia. The richness of the lexicon is a perverse acknowledgement of our night dread. It's an evolutionary thing, *Homo sapiens*'s scarediness of the hours 'twixt dusk and dawn. Long ago, out on the African savannah, we were not the apex predator that we are today, courtesy of technology. Humans rely primarily on the sense of sight, hence our affirmation of truth being 'I see'. Our vision is a poor thing at night. We exist today because our hairy, knuckle-dragging ancestors, disadvantaged in darkness, hid pathetically, shivering, up a tree or craven down a burrow to escape big cats—an archaic twist on being called a pussy.

Over the millennia, the nocturnal world became the repository of anxieties, rendered into personifications or supernatural/unnatural beings. In Greek mythology, the goddess Nyx emerged from a cave to ride across the sky in a chariot pulled by black steeds. She was Night, and she was Death. The night was where sprites, witches and monsters lurked and lived. For years, according to the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, the ravening Grendel attacked the mead hall of Heorot in darkness, consuming men unlucky enough to fall into its claws. Fear of the dark is fear of the unknown.

The rationality of the Enlightenment and the streetlamps of civilisation have all but banished fear of the nocturnal supernatural in the West. London's laneways were illuminated by fixed torches as early as the 16th century; Electric Avenue in Brixton was the first shopping street in the world to have electric lighting (in 1888, for the record). However, as the travel writer Megan Eaves-Egenes elucidates in her guide to contemporary matters nocturnal, light pollution has obliterated any meaningful relationship to the night. Yes, the night might have terrified us, but gazing up at the stars gave us geometry, religion ('For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him,' Matthew 2:1) and the ability to navigate oceans for the diaspora of our kind. The autochthonous of Australasia reached those far shores by following their stars.

> 'The night might have terrified us, but gazing at stars gave us geometry, religion and navigation'

The paradox of nocturnality is that we are frit by it, but we need it. The author's own story is *de nos jours*: after illness, death of a relative, a marriage break-up, she writes: 'The more time I spent in darkness, the more it seemed to heal me.' Nature as personal therapy, but fair enough: as the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* has noted, mental health and happiness are improved by 'greater connection to the night sky'. Dark skies are, not least, a human mind boon.

Ms Eaves-Egenes, an American based in Britain, where she has founded the community group Dark Sky London for 'rewilding of the night', journeys the globe for this book, from Argentina to Africa, Germany to Uzbekistan, seeking to record and comprehend darkness. She wakes up on futons in Japan and places stones on 'all my chakra points' before chanting Tibetan mantras. Her gushy, First World hippieness may not be to general taste ('Learning to see the stars from the Māori perspective filled me with hope') and the irony is that she only reaches real depth in her booky research. There is no meaningful, poetic connection to nocturnal ecology. However, her stats and background information on the negatives of the 21st century's light pollution are as important as they are disturbing. Skyglow from big cities can be seen from 124 miles away. Global light pollution is increasing 10% annually. Exposure to artificial light at night is 'significantly associated' with physical ills, from obesity to cardiometabolic disease. Should you try seeking the stars through the glare of urban light pollution ('a bleached void'), you may be disappointed at what you see; by 2030, there will be more than 100,000 satellites in orbit—false stars in Heaven. One rather admires New Zealand for trying to become the world's first dark-sky (All Black, even) nation.

I hear you cry 'but streetlights deter crime!' As Ms Eaves-Egenes notes, numerous studies find no significant evidence that turning off the lights at night causes an increase in crime. Rage, rage against the coming of the artificial light.

John Lewis-Stempel

Getty

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Bridge Andrew Robson

GOING into the last five matches of the round-robin in the 2025 Bermuda Bowl at Herning, Denmark, England were lying 11th (out of 24) with eight teams making the quarter-finals. Our last five matches were tough and a statistician would not have rated our chances. However, wins against Italy (albeit by one IMP) and Israel (by 28) moved us up a place for the final day.

Here are two deals from match 21 vs the US second team. The New York declarer went down in Four Spades on our first.

Dealer North
North-South Vulnerable

	♠ 642 ♥ J74 ♦ K863 ♣ 1076	
♠ Q6 ♥ K52 ♦ Q54 ♣ AQ932	N W E S	♠ KJ ♥ Q983 ♦ 102 ♣ KJ854
	♠ A109753 ♥ A106 ♦ AJ97 ♣ -	

South	West	North	East
		Pass	Pass
1♠	Pass(1)	1NT(2)	2♣(3)
Dbl(4)	4♣	Pass	Pass
Dbl(5)	Pass	4♠	End

1) Not a sound Two-level overcall with such a barren shape.
2) Even though North-South were playing Five-card Majors and, therefore, there is a known Spade fit, North didn't to want to raise Spades and excite his partner, nor pass and cede momentum to East-West.
3) For the lead—safer for East to stick his neck out than West (if there's a trump 'stack', it'll probably be with North, under East's trumps).
4) Take-out.
5) More take-out.

My partner and I had pushed South into the thin, but makeable, Four Spades. Declarer ruffed the Ace of Clubs lead and played Ace and a Spade, the two-two split revealed as East won the King and exited passively with a second Club.

After ruffing, declarer cashed the Ace of Diamonds then led the seven, which he (fatally) ran to East's ten. East led a third Club and declarer ruffed, crossed to the (Queen and) King of Diamonds and led a Heart to the ten. West won the King and led a second Heart, East having to score a trick with his Queen-nine over dummy's Knave—one down.

Declarer had misplayed the Diamonds. He can afford to lose a Diamond, provided he doesn't lose two Hearts. An Elimination and Throw-in will work, provided Diamonds are three-two. The correct line at trick five is to cash the Ace of Diamonds, cross to the King, ruff dummy's third Club and exit with a third Diamond. West wins the Queen, but must either break open Hearts (now declarer loses only one trick in the suit) or lead a fourth Club—declarer ruffs in one hand and sheds a Heart from the other—game made.

Partner David Gold and I enjoyed this defence to South's lowly One Notrump on our second board from the US match.

Dealer South
East-West Vulnerable

	♠ A973 ♥ 863 ♦ 1095 ♣ 1083	
♠ KJ2 ♥ A105 ♦ Q83 ♣ Q954	N W E S	♠ 10864 ♥ QJ7 ♦ A72 ♣ KJ7
	♠ Q5 ♥ K942 ♦ KJ64 ♣ A62	

South	West	North	East
1NT(1)	End		

1) The Weak Notrump, although less popular than Strong, was frequently played, especially when non-vulnerable.

West led a Club to East's King, declarer ducking. At trick two, the tall East player switched to a low Spade to the five, Knave and dummy's Ace. At trick three, declarer ran the ten of Diamonds to West's Queen. West cashed the King of Spades (felling declarer's Queen) and led a third Spade, East beating dummy's seven with the eight and cashing the ten, declarer discarding a Heart and a Club (West a Diamond).

East reverted to a low Club, declarer winning the Ace and leading the King of Diamonds. East won the Ace and led the Knave of Clubs. West let this card win, so East switched to the Queen of Hearts. West beat declarer's King with the Ace, cashed the Queen of Clubs and the defence scored the last two tricks with the ten and Knave of Hearts—five down.

England won the match 17-3 and moved into ninth place with two matches to go.

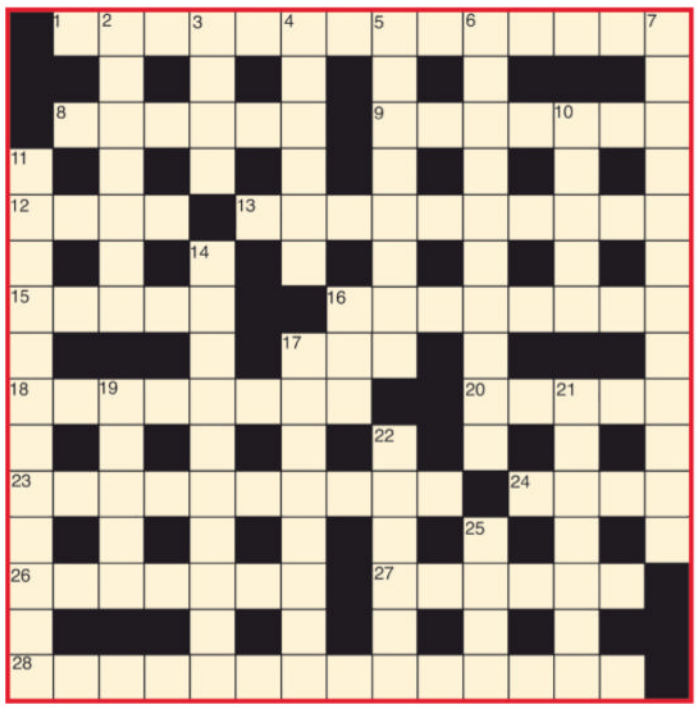
Crossword

A prize of £25 in book tokens will be awarded for the first correct solution opened. Solutions must reach Crossword No 4914, Country Life, 121–141 Westbourne Terrace, Paddington, London, W2 6JR, by **Tuesday, January 27**. UK entrants only

ACROSS
1 Emergency descent during Shrove Tuesday perhaps? (7,7)
8 Fishy look when went up (6)
9 Drink returned by girl in plant (7)
12 Object that time to explore (4)
13 Made conscious that inset sides appear wonky (10)
15 Appliance is uninteresting to former monarch (5)
16 Shorten a voyage across water (5,3)
17 Vessel to head back (3)
18 Prosper when appoint a top teacher (3,5)
20 Restored copper colour (5)
23 Is hesitant to become contradictory (10)
24 Competent in times tables (4)
26 Nice tax refund is approximate (7)
27 Commemoration of film on teeth (6)
28 Clearly edgy he'd spilt sugar (14)

DOWN
2 Painter returns when right out of fruit for form of target practice (7)
3 Fledging student in bed (4)
4 Type of organ (6)
5 Impressive drive by golfer is an unlikely occurrence (8)
6 Evening to keep for blackjack (10)
7 A thousand is the sum held that drops off to relatives (12)
10 Leans to inventories (5)
11 Getting rotten and recycled brief life story is humiliating (12)
14 Sly that one wooden cage has moulding (10)
16 Quiet assent to refuse daughter (3)
17 Spa later becomes public space for athletics (8)
19 Levy for bird man (5)
21 Ricochet is about certain (7)
22 Clear to place cover around minx (6)
25 Promise cereal is hot (4)

4914 **TAIT**



SOLUTION TO 4913

ACROSS: 1, Oversleep; 5, Villa; 8, Airfare; 10, Parfait; 11, Walkie-talkie; 14, Needle; 15, Cannibal; 16, Outskirt; 18, Puttee; 19, Clinker-built; 23, Apostle; 24, Earring; 25, Sheen; 26, Sidelight. DOWN: 1, Oval window; 2, Enrolments; 3, Exeat; 4, Papilla; 5, Version number; 6, Load; 7, Asti; 9, Axial skeleton; 12, Abstaining; 13, Sleep tight; 15, Cut; 17, Ringers; 20, Emend; 21, Bags; 22, Sole.

The winner of 4912 is R. Stevenson, Lincolnshire

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IWC. Civilian and military models.
Cartier pre 1980.
Breitling TopTime, Daytora, Navitimer etc
Jaeger LeCoultre. Reversos and circular models eg Geomatic, Geophysic, Memovox alarm etc.
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Jason Goodwin

Worth getting out of bed for

ALL around me, friends and relations were vanishing from the festive round; the buzz on the streets was that there was a lot of it about, for the time of year. Still, I thought I had got away with it. I could not have been bushier or brighter eyed at Christmas and for a son's birthday a few days later I was, I like to think, in sparkling form. In family tradition, we had Peking duck for supper; it was about the last thing I have tasted since. I knew I was going downhill when, over a New Year dinner, I found myself descending from mellifluous guest to involuntary Tom Waits impersonator.

I took to my bed where, happily, I was able to attend in flashes of lucidity to the G&T Garden Tours social-media account and to the list of splendid friends who had volunteered their gardening resolutions for 2026. It was something to lie in bed, surrounded by cold cures and curiously impenetrable books, and imagine Isabel Bannerman, of this parish, using a large electric drill to make holes in the grass to plant bulbs. Her resolution was not to plant bulbs—she was going to do that anyway—but to tell us all what a great idea it was. She and her son, Bertie, had managed 600 bulbs in an hour by this method.

Another friend, also of this parish, is Non Morris, now a leading authority on alpine flowers. She has actually been on one of our tours. Non's intention was a gardening ABC—until she hit the L one. Was she brave enough, she wondered, to get rid of her lawn in London? Try imagining that on a double dose of Benylin. Later that day, I put her resolution on Instagram and lay back, exhausted.

> 'Was she brave enough to get rid of her lawn in London? Imagine that on a dose of Benylin'

How glad I was, then, to receive Howard Sooley's soothing resolution. Howard, as you will know, is the photographer who helped his friend Derek Jarman make a garden on the shingle at Dungeness in Kent, playing around and breaking rules for fun. Howard hates show. He comes from Doncaster in South Yorkshire. His resolution was to make places to sit and simply be in the garden.

Matthew Rice, again of the COUNTRY LIFE parish, wanted more sitting in the garden as well, but not for himself, I suspect. Other people can do the sitting as he draws, plants, hoes, picks, inspects and does all the other marvellous things he does and that make his house, his garden, his sketchbooks and his travel diaries so full and fabulous. To that end, the last of his 10—10!—resolutions was to get more chairs and tables to put into the garden. I split his resolutions in two and groggily posted one lot one day and the other lot a few days later, in case people got too weary.

Our garden-tour friends were amazingly courteous and resourceful. Tania Compton, the great designer, wired from the redwood forests of California in the US. Johnnie Boden proved the old adage about busy people always finding time by whipping back with his resolutions (re: wildflower management) in about five minutes. Jake Hobson, of cult garden-tool company Niwaki, whose Japanese-style garden is hidden in a sleepy Dorset town, had properly Zen thoughts about 2026. Angel Collins shared a recipe for a homemade box-blight medicine. Nicola Shulman had a good one—and a bad one, which involved stealing cuttings from somebody else's plant. Jenny Makepeace's top tip gives a whole new meaning to St Valentine's Day. You can find the full set on our newsletter—inspiring, energising, rallying. It's enough to get out of bed for.

Next week **Jonathan Self**

TOTTERING-BY-GENTLY By Annie Tempest

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Daffy? It's your sister, Batty... Has Dicky got any unplucked woodcock today?
I thought you had a 'road-kill' only policy...
I only want to snip off the ear feathers to use as a paint brush - the dogs will love the rest...
Annie Tempest ©2025

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